

reverie

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reverie

by [saintaches](#)

Summary

Several years after leaving Juilliard, Dream is a successful violin soloist. George is stranded in New York, where it rains more than one hundred days per year. It's no wonder resentment begins to blossom—especially since the roots of it underpin their relationship.

Notes

sequel to [jaw](#)!! read that first or this may not make much sense

as always, i try to research as many things as i can but sometimes i blatantly ignore accuracy in favour of plot :) for the melodrama!! with that in mind, let's commence

gifted to Lola because this is ur fault <3

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

electric mind

There's something remarkable about Rêverie.

By any stretch of the imagination, it's not amongst the group of piano works cited richest in complexity, but George loves it all the same. He's not a poet. He isn't sure he could write love letters to music, line after line of how each phrase corresponds to something he's conjured from his mind. Music is divided into pages, and the pages into lines, and the lines into bars, and staring at millions of notes puncturing the stave makes it difficult for him to see Somme red, or Styxian darkness, or the bleach of bone when left in the sun. It's easier to tie it to feelings he already knows.

That's difficult to do sometimes.

Feelings are uncouth. Hatred, envy, and love are uncouth, so it makes sense that the most ill-mannered of people would be able to draw it out of him. Stick a knife in his gut, run artist fingers through his blood. Smash his marble heart into pieces. His playing became better after that, for he had more diamond fragments clutched in his fists to reflect the full spectrum of light across his skin.

If he had to compare Rêverie to anything, perhaps it would be the feeling of weighted eyelids in the evening, when he's not sure whether the darkness is the end of the day or the beginning of sleep. Or a rocking of the sea, or the rope strung from the oak tree hidden somewhere amongst the acres and acres comprising his grandparents' estate. When he was younger, he'd swing until his muscles were weary, content to be away from the house. There were things in the house he didn't like so much.

Rêverie is a little like that. Swinging until his arms turn numb, staying out of doors in the countryside and wishing he could find his way to Wonderland.

"Are you falling asleep on me?" A voice says above his head, but he feels the vibration of it against his cheek more than anything.

"I'm awake," he assures, even as a yawn wrenches free of his tongue.

"You don't look it."

He blinks, once, twice, and the Seine pieces itself back together before him. Memories of hallways adorned with portraits of people he can't name dissipate. His head rests sideways, so the skyline runs at a forty-five degree angle across his vision, adorned by city lights which appear similar to floating lanterns every time he squints hard enough that his eyelashes obscure their true form. Upon the railing, his hands curl into loose fists. There's warmth emanating next to him, and somewhere from behind him, piano notes tumble out of an open apartment window he doesn't have the energy to turn around and see. The pull of sleep intensifies. The water pays them no mind where it meets the embankment.

"Flying makes me sleepy," he says after a moment, allowing his eyes to dip again. Longer this time.

"Welcome to my world."

"*Your* world?" he asks without opening his eyes. "It's my world too."

“Okay, concertmaster. You’re not a soloist.”

“I’m not a concertmaster, either. You really have to stop calling me that.”

Dream’s laugh resonates somewhere deep inside him, quiet enough he would lose it to the rumble of the traffic if he weren’t so attuned to him. “You will be. One day.”

“Not if we stand here for the rest of time.” George lifts his head now, blinking frantically in an attempt to make the lights separate into individual orbs. With each dim, he makes more sense of his surroundings, of Dream gazing at the opposite side of the river with a quiet smile slung across his face, of the ache spreading across the soles of his feet, of the evening digging its freezing fingers into his upper arms. A realisation pours over him at the pace of snow drifting from the clouds. Unhurried. “You’re performing tomorrow, don’t you want to practise more?”

Dream shrugs before drawing his jacket tighter around his torso. The patches are beginning to fray at the edges, but every time George suggests he get a new one, he finds Dream with a needle in his mouth and his eyebrows furrowed as he sews the corners back down. “Won’t make much difference. Whatever happens, happens—c’est la vie, I guess.”

“Your pronunciation is horrible,” George informs him.

“Okay. Just because you can speak two-”

“Four,” George corrects with a smirk. “And latin, but that’s...you know.”

Dream stares at him in bewilderment. “What’s the point?”

“Use your imagination.” George’s chin dips into the cup of his palm, a sigh spilling over his lips as the city flows around him. “More practical than violin, I’d imagine.”

Now there are arms wrapping around his waist, a chin resting atop his head, words vibrating against his skull when Dream hums under his breath. “Practicality is boring. I’d rather learn violin than fucking latin.”

“Well you did,” George says—anything to dispel his mind from wandering back through Calais and across the channel, back to a time of *practicality* and *right from wrong* and most importantly, *perfection*. “I don’t think you’d be much good at it anyway,” he teases, “you’re hardly analytical.”

“Don’t need to be. I’m something of a *prodigy*.”

The sky flashes across his vision for a second as he rolls his eyes. “Well, lucky you. You’d be fucked if you weren’t.”

“Come on, don’t you believe in fate?”

“Not really.”

“Romantic,” Dream says sarcastically, lips scratching over the surface of George’s cheek as he leans forward to press kisses across his skin. And again, and again, until he’s halfway breathless and the lights are swarming together like fireflies. Warm hands pushing up under his shirt, running along the expanse of his stomach as though they’re not standing in the middle of Paris with the taste of wine sticking to their tongues while the moon peels back its cloud veil.

When the touch grazes over his chest and teeth over his neck, George has the sense to step away with a scandalised expression. “Dream, we’re in public.”

“So?”

“You’re an animal.”

Dream holds his hands up in surrender, although he doesn’t look overly apologetic. His teeth flash under the streetlight, one side of his jacket falls off his shoulder, silver hoops glint from his lobes, and there’s a chill spreading across the tops of his cheeks. His violin case clings to his back. George is still horribly in love. “Would you like us to not be in public?”

“Yes, preferably.”

“Should’ve said that,” Dream chides, and now his fingers are interlacing themselves with George’s as he tugs him down the street, away from the river. “It’s sort of nice here at night, though...”

“I’m sure you’ll be back before long,” George says. Neither of them mention that Dream will most likely be here by himself next time, frown marring his face as he sits in traffic without George to take his mind off it. There’s nothing they can do to change it. Scheduling is unkind to them, and so they find themselves in opposite corners of the world more often than not.

Once they’re back at the apartment, it doesn’t take long for George to find himself facing the ceiling, vision obscured by sand coloured hair as Dream sucks irises up the column of his throat. The sheets wrinkle beneath his bare limbs. He clutches one of the bedposts for dear life, drunken eyes rolling up as Dream twists his fingers to brush against his prostate.

“Fucksake,” he gasps, toes curling against the mattress. “I’ll fall asleep before we’re done at this rate, get on with it.”

That earns him a bite to his collarbone, and Dream’s fingers retract from his hole. It makes him whine, pushing his hips against nothing as though it’ll make Dream cave.

“Maybe,” he says, sitting back against his heels. Behind him, streetlamps cast an orange glow around his shoulders, and George is torn between whether Dream looks more like an angel or the devil reincarnate tonight. In the twilight, he guesses he can be heavenly. He’s not performing until the following evening, and George knows he’ll taste like tobacco and smell the same this time tomorrow. Dream’s fingers walk themselves up his stomach, his ribs, his chest. His palm flattens over his heart. “Maybe I’ll just leave you like this.” He leans forward to press his lips to his ear. “Maybe I’ll see more of the city by myself.”

“As if you could ever leave me.”

Dream shrugs. Then, he steps off the bed, bare limbs flowing gold and flawless in the sympathetic gaze of the night, imperfections smoothed out to nothing by darkness. “You’ll be waiting for me, won’t you? You’ll stay right where I tell you to.”

He’s reaching for his shirt when George props himself onto his elbows, words smarting at the back of his throat. “Wait,” he begs.

“Hmm?”

“Don’t you want to desecrate it a little? The apartment?”

Dream casts his eyes over the interior, unimpressed. But George can see the glint in his gaze, the darkness brewing at the bottom of his stomach as he considers staining the sheets, denting the wall behind the headboard, leaving angry marks all over George’s skin to match. Taking money between his teeth and doing as he pleases. He has something *money* can never buy, something

which makes auditoriums full of critics clasp their hands and something which makes George beg him to return to bed with his palms pressed together as though addressing the skies.

So after a moment, he drops the shirt in a heap on the rug. “Are you trying to tell me you’re more beautiful than Paris?”

“Yes.”

The mattress dips under Dream’s weight. George shivers despite the heat which crackles across his skin when Dream slides his hands around his waist, squeezing hard enough he imagines there’ll be imprints of his fingers left behind when he pulls away. “You’re lucky you’re right,” he says, and George’s world diminishes to nothing as he leans in to kiss him breathless.

George is grateful Dream agreed to come here, because the sheets are soft against his legs, and he’s not overwhelmed by the smell of detergent. Instead, the sound of Paris washes over them in tandem with the light, and the knowledge nobody can hear them through a hotel wall makes him gasp without restraint every time Dream’s fingers press bruises into his skin.

And even though Dream wouldn’t admit it vocally, he knows he’s grateful too.

Beats a hotel, Dream said several hours earlier, after George tossed him the keys, the door swinging open to reveal dark floorboards running in flawless lines to the edge of the room where the city light prodded at the gauze covering the windows.

This is what happens if you just let me fucking help, was his reply, punctuated as the door shut behind him. He didn’t wait long before abandoning his bags at the foot of the bed and collapsing onto the sheets, clean linen prepared by housekeeping to cushion his fall. The mattress stretched out for miles either side of him, amplified by his tendency to tuck his knees against his chest. Amber painted his eyelids. In the fog of his mind, he registered Dream poking around in the kitchen, the sound of ceramic protesting to denote careless hands opening cupboards. *Try not to break the plates*, he called, words slurring together with lethargy, *Mother is partial to them*.

The floorboards creaked, announcing Dream’s re-entrance into the bedroom. George cracked an eye open to reveal his lover doused in golden light, shirt discarded somewhere in order to expose the cut of his collarbones. *This is your parent’s?* he asked, a veiled gaze cast at the view. George could practically see the numbers tipping upwards in his head as he surveyed the fittings, the furnishings, the size, the skyline.

He winced, the tightness of his throat forgotten for the time being. *Yeah, but, they don’t come here so much*, he faltered. Was that the right thing to say? Surely it wasn’t.

You’re overthinking, Dream said after a moment, crossing the room to join him in the middle of the bed. His arms were steady around his waist, and where there would usually be a crease between his eyebrows whenever he was thinking about these things, there was only unmarked skin.

That’s where George pressed his lips, revelling in how warm he was. *You’re okay with that? Maybe we should’ve got the hotel after all, I’m sorry-*

George, Dream cut him off with a kiss to his parted mouth. He could still taste the beaujolais. *They own it, right?*

Yes.

I would’ve gone somewhere else by now if I cared, he said, breath hot against the curve of George’s chin. *I can afford it.*

Okay, he sighed, aerated with relief.

Dream plucked his glasses from where they sat on the nightstand and positioned them back over his face, thumbs tracing around the full moon shapes before he leant away. *But I would like to see the river without your mom's curtains in the way*, he said with a wrinkled nose, *they're horrid*.

They're not so bad.

This entire place is fucking monochrome. God, I want to throw paint at the walls.

Save it for our apartment, please. George shifted his legs off the bed, toes pressing into the floorboards as a yawn worked its way up his throat. He stretched his arms above his head to shake the residual weariness, before pushing himself to his feet and swaying on the spot for a moment. If it was up to him, he would've fallen asleep there and then. But hunger was beginning to settle into the pit of his stomach, and Dream was leaning the upper half of his body out of the window with his hands grasping the frame, as though he would die if he didn't set foot in the streets within the next ten minutes.

He removed his knees from the sill. A smile brightened his features more than the lights ever could—George knew he was thinking about the place they'd found together, big enough just for the two of them and a little breathing room. Nothing like this, with its interior designed by someone he'd never met. *If I must.*

Now, George doesn't restrain himself as Dream fucks into him, the sound of their bodies meeting over and over spinning his mind into a frenzy. There are tears beading upon his eyelashes like melee diamonds, escaping every now and again to run across his cheeks in shimmering trails. Dream is murmuring something to his temple, but he doesn't process the words. It's an impossible feat. Instead, he gasps brokenly as he approaches the edge, fingers knotting tighter and tighter into the sheets as the pressure in his chest intensifies.

"Yeah," Dream mutters, although George doesn't remember asking him anything. "You can cum, darling."

His vision whites out when he does, clouds pressing against him as though he's peering directly into heaven. In the back of his mind, he registers Dream spilling inside of him, hands tightening around his hips when he does. The perspiration clinging to his chest glimmers as he inhales, exhales, over, over, over and over. Slower with each one. Eyes falling shut, three worn words spilling over their lips, *I love you I love you I love you* said a million times and one. So similar to the opposite, love and hatred sister sensations. Hands rubbing over each other, polishing each spot to brass as they touch, and touch, and touch, as though they never intend to stop.

Perhaps they don't.

Perhaps they intend to turn each other gold, unable to break apart even for a moment.

Then there's quiet. It consists of sheets shifting against bare skin, long fingers drumming over the flat plane of his stomach, the damp sound that kisses make when sloppily pressed to the delicate skin behind his ear.

"We can use that fancy fucking bathtub," Dream whispers after a while, when their legs are tangled in knots and George's image of the room is beginning to look less fuzzy.

"Don't wanna move," he protests.

"Do you want to wake up with dried cum on your stomach?"

“...no.”

“Exactly.”

As it turns out, he doesn't have to move all that much, since the bed disappears beneath him and the linen brushing against his skin turns to air. The heartbeat beneath his ear masks the sound of running water. Steady, grounding, the earth and the rain in perfect unison as Dream breathes, and the skies turn, and the seas claw at the land. Then there are the bath oils. They spill together and sweeten the edges of his worn senses. Rather than the black and amber of cityscapes at night, George's world becomes bergamot, honey, osmanthus. And he feels as though he could cry—that awful, desolate feeling which fills him when his contentment is overspilling and he can't savour every last dreg of it because there's nowhere to hold it in his brimming palms.

So it drifts. Into the drain, into the river, into the sea. George isn't sure, but there's a strange emptiness which accompanies scattering his being like that.

“Better?” Dream asks when they're sitting together, both of his legs bracketing George's frame. His fingers push through his hair, which results in his head tipping backwards to rest upon his shoulder. In front of them, a window displays the skyline, venetian blinds positioned so that he can see slats of midnight sky. There are suds trailing across his shoulders. More trailing across his chest, each one bursting with rainbows of refracted light.

“I guess so.”

“Told you.”

“You have to take me back to bed,” he says, one corner of his lips pulling up.

In bygone days, perhaps Dream would've pulled his hair hard enough to make stars dance across his vision, mark red crescents into the soft flesh covering his hips, rub soap into his scalp until it became abrasive, but they've come a long way since then. Rather than hissing under his breath, he kisses George's nape and mutters, “of course I will.”

“You fool.”

“I'm a fool for being in love?”

“As am I.”

Dream's laughter vibrates where his chest meets George's back, bouncing from the loft of the ceiling until he can imagine it's raining meteorites. Each one a wish successfully granted, since they're in the city of love with nothing to separate their bodies from each other, the imprint of Dream still stamped across his insides. London is miles away, New York even further. Within his head, piano notes float around, akin to the feeling of sinking his nose into fresh bedlinen. “I'm glad we can agree.”

The water drains, a towel is wrapped around his shoulders, and he's set on the edge of the bath to watch the whirlpool forming at the plughole. Dream vanishes somewhere into the apartment with his hair sticking in every direction. After a minute or so, he returns. There's a shirt falling off his collarbone, and the smell of vetiver follows him around.

“Found the library,” he announces with a roll of his eyes. “And the other two bedrooms, and far too many showers for two people. Seriously, what do they need all these rooms for?”

“I don't know,” he admits, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth. “The hell of it?”

“Just makes me laugh,” Dream says. “It’s another world, I guess.”

“Sorry.”

“Not your fault. You don’t even talk to them.”

George decides he’s had enough of this conversation as soon as it begins. He sticks his arms out, uncaring that the towel falls into the bathtub. Dream’s gaze pointedly drops down, drawing red over every inch of skin he surveys with those blazing eyes of his, one eyebrow propped up in amusement. “Do you wanna go again?” he asks as he’s pulling George into his arms.

“Mmm, no. Too tired. And we just bathed, it’d be a waste.”

“Shame,” he sighs.

George smiles against his chest when they lie down once more. “How do you have so much energy?” he asks, attuned to the way Dream seems to vibrate in his arms, frantic energy spooling out of him into a red haze above their heads. It’s very distracting. Even with the white noise of the streets, George finds that Dream has a tendency to electrify him, as though they’re the clouds brushing past each other until lightning cleaves the sky in two.

“I don’t know. I’m hyperactive, especially at night.”

He considers that for a minute. Then the ceiling rose spirals back into view as he rolls onto his back, white plaster jutting out in intricacies he can’t properly see without his glasses. Instead, it appears as stratus clouds. “Why don’t you play something?”

“After sex?”

“It’s never stopped you before,” George says. “You said it helps, actually. Like when you made me play that stupid cadenza—”

“Okay, I apologised for that. A lot of times.”

“Because I wasn’t in a good headspace, yes.” George reaches for his hand, squeezes his fingers tight. “But you’re fine right now. Maybe it’ll help you sleep.”

A minute passes. Then another. He thinks perhaps Dream is falling into unconsciousness, but his voice resounds before long, with none of its usual drama to elevate it into something fit for concert halls or starlit practise rooms or apartments allowing the rain in at the corners. This voice is older, weathered by years of learning to be intimate. Not a tempest, not a downpour. More like the sun fading angry red to sweet pink, coaxing flower petals open until they’re content to appreciate each other as they are without popping the buds open by force. “What should I play?” is what he says.

“Play me what you’re playing tomorrow. I want to hear it first.”

“Devil’s trill? I’ve performed it a hundred times—”

“Not in Paris,” George assures with confidence. “Perhaps it’ll be different this time. You like imagining things, don’t you?”

So Dream sets about retrieving his violin from its case, long fingers working the clasps and silk and the screw at the end of the bow. Then he’s adjusting the pegs, eyebrows furrowed.

“Your A is slightly flat,” George supplies from his position against the headboard.

Dream shoots him a glance, before crossing the room to where he sits. "Okay, perfect pitch," he says, pushing the violin into George's hands, "do it for me."

"I could've just..." he trails off with one glance at Dream's expression, deciding he'd rather not spend the next ten minutes bickering about it. He passes the violin back to Dream once it's tuned, a sigh of exasperation flooding from his lips. His bottom lip sticks out in mocking. "Can you play now? Or do you need me to put your shoulder rest on for you?"

"Fuck off."

When Dream begins to play, the most peculiar thing happens, for George isn't propped up in a four poster bed with the curtains drifting in the breeze, but in the parterre of the concert hall, gaze transfixed on the stage. Dream plays just the same as he did in the apartment, with an expression which would be more suited to a murder than a recital. The fingerboard drips bloody notes. Broken strings call to the front of George's mind, the memory of how Dream never missed a bar. He plays like he's the devil itself, appearing in the midst of a dream to play with virtuosity so great it can never be recreated.

Except it is, and George can only watch.

Perhaps he'd be more frightened of how Dream looks, if he didn't get to witness how soft his gaze is in the lowlight of quiet evenings. Evenings occupied with the rustling of pages, the whirl of the stereo, wine glasses resounding against each other, rain tapping at the window. That Dream is in there somewhere, he knows. He knows because the phrases are sweeter than they would've been several years ago, the notes less barbed and bruised as they flow from the strings. Violent, yes, but not violent in an unthinkable debased manner.

Violent like love is violent, violent like death comes in the middle of the night and rips lives apart without uttering a word. Silent, peaceful. A movement of the earth, an unstoppable force.

So, so violent.

Dream looks right at him when the end of the sonata is drawing near, and the darkness flickers for a moment. A light, subtle enough anyone else would miss it. But George sees it, and he thinks it's something merciful, something the devil would do as a reminder it was heavenborn, once. It would say to look at the sky one last time, to feel the sun on one's face before being deprived of it forever. It would take a violin in its arms and play more beautifully than any human, for virtuosity must be ensnared with a higher power. Mustn't it? Dream must be fated to play this way, to love in this way, to feel this way.

George must be fated to be his inspiration.

Then he looks away, and the hall ripples at the edges.

And the piano notes are flooding the inside of his brain even though there's no sign of one, and he's swinging backwards and forwards on the rope strung to the oak tree, and he's in Dream's arms, and his eyes are closing for longer and longer, and his heart is slowing, and he thinks perhaps death is taking him after all.

The devil, leading him to the pit of the earth.

George wakes not with a gasp, but with heavy resignation settled in the middle of his chest.

It's morning, and the weather is awful—the sound of drumming upon glass numbs him little by little, until the sinking of his stomach begins to err the line between conjecture and reality. *Marble heart*, he's been called before. Unfounded, since his organs pulse like anyone else's, and warmth crowds beneath his skin, and oxygen draws in and out of his chest, faster when he's elated.

But he can't see red. If he were to cut himself open, perhaps he'd find his veins crystallised and dormant, yet remain unable to tell the difference. He hasn't heard music forged from his own blood since—

Well, it's been too long.

He rolls over with a groan, an abysmal thing hefted from the depths of his lungs to resound in the emptiness of his bedroom. Rain skitters against the window panes, drawing broken stave lines over and over in beating rivulets. The sheets are freezing beneath his limbs. He brings his knees up to his chest and pushes his hands to his cheeks, every exhale more ragged than the last.

The pipes are silent. Silence makes his thoughts louder. All he has to do is swing his legs over the edge of the bed and dial the heating up, but the prospect of beginning another day so soon terrifies him into staying in bed a while longer.

When he grows tired of the mattress stretching out for miles on either side of him, he abandons his wasteland and instead climbs into the shower, replacing rain with boiling water. Marble skin with rose. He stands there long enough that his joints glow red and his cheeks pink. Afterwards, he pushes the hair from his face and stares at himself in the mirror, and the darkened state of his points is affirmation enough that he hasn't petrified just yet.

He's alive, just the same. No matter how the cold worms its way under his skin during the autumn, no matter that *he* once said George plays like he's dead.

Not the bloody, violent sort of death. More like crossing his arms over his chest and allowing the heat to bleed right out of him, he mouths, imagining it in a voice lower than his own.

George's lips quirk. Ever so dramatic, is Dream.

A shame, really, that he's not on the other side of the bed to keep it warm, and he's not standing in front of George to tell him his cheeks are red with blood, and he's not here to kiss every inch of flushed skin while muttering something or other beneath his breath. Something about colours, no doubt. How they relate to music. George listens every time; not because he's a fool, but because he's in love, even after this many years.

It makes the waiting so much more unbearable, and George does more than his fair share of that these days.

He glances at his calendar. There are three days until Dream is back from Vienna, three days for George to waste by missing him when he knows Dream doesn't have the time to do the same. Across the world, there are more things to fill his head with. Foreign orchestras and hours of practise and streets with names he can't pronounce correctly and music to be performed in front of brimming concert halls because Dream is *someone* now, and George is stuck in New York where it rains whenever he's by himself as if the sky loves Dream just the same as everyone else. George

can't be upset with the clouds for raining, because his spirits are dampened too.

Three days until Dream is back, but he'll be gone again before long. To Oslo, or Prague, or Paris. Without George this time. He can't follow Dream to every nook and corner of the world like some kind of half-formed shadow, even less so considering how much time he has to spend practising if he ever wants Dream to look him in the eyes and call him *concertmaster* again.

He retrieves his violin from its case now, a frown settling over his lips and a dent between his eyebrows. The morning is too old. It'll be dark by the time he can stop, and there'll be stars shining above the layer of pollution that blankets the city, dimmed to nothing by a million street lamps and headlights. As the violin rests under his chin, he twists the end of his bow in a practised motion.

Similarly to how he woke, he begins to play with a weight pressing between his ribs.

George loses the next few hours to the prison bars running along the manuscript, to meticulous pencilling whenever he plays something wrong more than once, to staring through the first floor window of their apartment whenever the notes tangle together. There's not much to look at from this low down. Only the rainwater pooling in the road, and the streetlights flickering to life. Ideally, George would like to live somewhere he can watch the sun as it rises, orange light filling more and more of his music stand, but that would have been out of the question considering Dream's predisposition to heights.

When his eyelids begin to succumb to sleepy gravity, the violin goes back in the case. The manuscript is reordered in a neat pile atop the piano, where he sits for a while, staring at the keys. He doesn't play it so much anymore. He doesn't have the time.

But tonight he plays anyway, hurrying ahead when he presses the wrong notes, a force only stoppable by the fine at the end of the page. Even then he has shelves of other things to play, things he doesn't need to shine to perfection because they'll never leave the sanctity of his music room. Push and pull, eyelids shutting for longer and longer. Fingers slumbering upon the keys, thick with sleepiness as he recalls the music from the dream. Time ticks faster when he's playing like this, and it's midnight before he can begin to wonder what Dream is doing all the way in Vienna, whether or not he's awake yet.

He falls back into bed, and he hopes he's not. Then they can be asleep at the same time, even if only for a moment, and he can imagine a heartbeat beneath his ear instead of starch linen.

George dreams of the Seine again, how water tumbles like fingers over piano keys.

He wakes not with a gasp, but with heavy resignation in the middle of his chest.

The shower is much too big for one person, so there's plenty of room for his thoughts to overflow from his brain and spill into the plughole alongside the sleeping aches nestled in his joints. It's worse today. He drags soap over his skin. Today is a rehearsal day, so he has to climb into the back of a car he'd struggle to afford if he were nothing but an orchestral violinist, and watch through the

window as people with entire lives of their own dart out into the road. He has to wonder where each of them are going, if it's better or worse than his destination.

Concerts lose their charm when they happen every week. He can't tell one from the next, a million flicks of the baton to muddle together in the rain-battered depths of his mind.

George isn't even concertmaster, so he doesn't command anything anymore, not like he did at Juilliard. There's only one person he really loves to follow, and as it happens, it's not the existing leader of the New York philharmonic. So he misses college more than he should. Misses performing next to Dream, misses being pushed to his knees in the middle of starlit practise rooms, misses the feeling of broad hands marking his skin because hatred requires obsession, and nobody else is obsessed enough to hate him.

As the rehearsal venue looms in front of him, some of the tension in his stomach eases. The promise of music makes him put one foot in front of another, the prospect of performing as a cog in a well oiled machine. That's just how orchestral playing is. About the whole, rather than the individual.

The corridors are silent, but there's an odd sort of calm to be found in the lone sound of his footsteps, the creaking of doors as he passes through each one. It's too early to be here. When he reaches the hall, he can count on one hand the number of players already seated, and there's no noise to accompany him as he unclasps the latches on his case. Outside, the hum of traffic fades to nothing. Within an hour, the room will be hotter than it is at present, with more chairs protesting against the floorboards as their occupants shuffle around. For now, it's near silent.

So without fail, he's early for every rehearsal. Call it a force of habit.

He's warming up when his desk partner sits down in the seat next to him, a weary smile across her face which suggests she's been doing this for years and years. She's older than him, but then again, most of the first violin section is. Prodigy is a word reserved for people like Dream, but George must've been born with *something*, because he wouldn't be sitting in this chair if he wasn't. A quieter sort of genius.

Or a pressure great enough to forge diamond.

"Morning," she says, without a curled lip or scrunched nose. Pleasantries instead of disdain. Poised nonetheless, in a tone most commonly used for coworkers. Or strangers.

"Morning."

"How are you?" she asks, and George resists the urge to yawn.

He's not in the mood for small talk, particularly not about himself. When he first met Dream, he despised the way he spoke in sonnets written with blood, spat fire for words, and bled the void from his irises whenever he was angry, but nowadays it just makes everyone else seem like pictures of mundanity. So George doesn't want to talk about his week, not really. But there's still something which compels him to do it—the same something which makes him smile as though he's trying to sell the stars and sit with his spine straightened out.

Dream often pokes fun at him for it.

"Good," he says. "I mean, it's quiet. Good for working."

"It is?"

“My partner is overseas at the moment,” he explains, running a thumb over mother of pearl.

“Your partner? Isn’t that-”

“Yes,” he cuts, before she can say it. George wouldn’t be surprised if more people in this orchestra knew Dream’s name than his. He smiles like there’s not a hole in his heart. “Yes, it’s him.”

“He’s performing here soon, isn’t he?”

George nods. “Next season,” he mutters, although the corners of his lips betray him.

Even though he won’t sit in the middle of the stage, there’s something he adores about watching Dream play. Something he can appreciate more than anyone else, because as soon as the lights are out and the sheets are over their heads, Dream will often whisper to him about what he’s thinking when he’s playing. Earthquakes tearing reality in two, vultures picking at marrow, placing his hands flat against the ground and straightening back up with bones clutching his fingers. Red, red, elegies.

Red doesn’t always equate to blood seeping out of a body. Red is in the veins, pushing in and away from the heart, a reminder that love is violent, love is the same colour as death.

You, Dream says on occasion, leaning forward to trap George’s protests upon his tongue and cover the red of his cheeks with both palms.

“That’ll be convenient.”

“Huh?” George asks, smarting with shame as his mind wanders down paths it shouldn’t. About what tends to happen when they’re murmuring about music at two in the morning, eyelids heavy and lazy smiles pulled across their faces.

“Well, he doesn’t have to travel far,” she says with a laugh.

“Oh, yes. He’s barely at home anymore.”

“You know, I don’t think I could do it.”

“Be a soloist?”

“Yes. The same repertoire all the time, the travel...it seems very lonely.”

George pauses at that. He’d rather be lonely on the other side of the world than in a grey apartment with rain pouring across the windows, but he supposes she’s talking in familial terms. George isn’t so acquainted with his own. He can’t remember the last time they spoke. They like Dream more than him these days—he’s full of anecdotes about his life as a soloist, full of stories George wasn’t there to experience. Full of music more enrapturing than that of an orchestral player. It doesn’t even matter that Dream fucking *hates* them, hates the practised manners and measured smiles he had to coax out of George to leave behind something impassioned, because they’re blinded by the way *prodigy* looks all lit up in stage lights.

It’s not as if he can blame anyone for loving Dream. He misses the sound of his violin filling the apartment at odd hours of the night, misses the weight in bed next to him, misses warm hands tugging him from sleep every morning.

“Lonely,” he affirms.

That makes two of us.

The rehearsal goes well. On days like this George is reminded why he's on the other side of the Atlantic with a violin in his hand—the push and pull of music, how everything fits together when played right. It doesn't matter so much that he's not concertmaster, for there'll be time for that. He'll practise until the sky falls down if he must.

Before the horizon begins to dim, they finish early. George takes the opportunity to walk home, arms crossed over his chest to pull his coat tighter, tighter around his body in lieu of warm arms. And because he has time, he takes a detour with an umbrella held over his head.

It's strange to walk along the pavements at an unhurried pace, appreciating every raindrop as it bursts, every plume of smoke drifting towards the sky. Strange, because everyone around him walks with their heads down, rushing home or somewhere under cover. George's blood runs cold. He doesn't feel the chill so much, and so he's content to step around the puddles pooling at street corners on his way home.

Nevertheless, he accepts the warmth of the atrium when he eventually reaches it. It's small, understated. There are no guards, no sweeping marble floors leading to seamless elevators, no amenities, no windows stretching from the floor to the ceiling. Instead, there are stairs up to the front entrance, quiet music filtering through one of the doors, orange light spilling out of the brackets mounted on the walls.

Needless to say, it's a far cry from the apartment in Île Saint Louis. It's a far cry from anything he's used to. George tried to find something more upscale, he really did, but Dream refused to move into anything he couldn't pay for half of. And although he'd never admit it, there's an odd sort of charm about this place. Even if they bump elbows when they're both in the kitchen at the same time.

It's a place for living, rather than existing. It's a place for painting the walls and sticking magnets to the fridge and scrubbing wine stains from the upholstery and arguing over how big the music room needs to be.

It's a place for breaking in.

He climbs to the first floor, and searches for his keys in the depths of his coat. They're in one of the pockets. By the time he's pushing the correct one into the lock, he's realising the music is emanating from within the apartment, and confusion begins to twist in the depths of his stomach, because Dream isn't supposed to be back for another twenty-four hours.

When he closes the door behind him, he's met with low lighting, the smell of cinnamon candles, a song he only knows the words to because it's on one of Dream's playlists. His violin case is set down while he slings his coat onto the hook and the umbrella into the doorway where it can't track rainwater over the rugs. He doesn't call out just yet, content to breathe warm air into his lungs and watch light flickering over his skin. There are an extra pair of shoes on the rack. Dream's keys reside on the hall table. It's the simple things he misses most, he thinks as he walks past the heater, dialled up to fill the apartment with warmth. It's the things he doesn't notice until they're restored.

And the important, complex things too.

Things like Dream sitting on the sofa pushed against the window, hair illuminated by the lamplight just the same as it was all those years ago, on an island in the middle of the Seine. Set ablaze, as though Dream is tied to a pyre—perhaps his devilry has finally caught up to him. There's an empty wine glass on the coffee table, and his ankles are crossed on the cushions. He's humming. His shirt is faded, and the decal is peeling away. More creases are working their way into his skin than

before, but George only wants to kiss each one with fevered lips, tongue and teeth marking him as *mine mine mine*.

Breaking, breaking. Breaking in until they fit perfectly.

“Dream,” he says, the corners of his lips pulling up despite his best efforts to maintain his composure. It’s been years, and he still reacts like it’s the first time. Again and again and again.

Dream’s head lifts, and George is relieved that he smiles too. He smiles with lips stained red, appearing bloody in the evening light, pupils enlarged, arteries ringing the irises. “Hi,” he says. His voice scratches. “I thought you might be at rehearsal.”

“Did you have to wait long?”

“An hour? I thought about coming to steal you away, but—” he hazards a glance through the window, eyebrows folding into their crease lines as familiarly as worn clothes settle over the body — “the weather is shit.”

“That would’ve been unprofessional.”

“Have I ever cared?”

“No, but I want a promotion. Anyway, you’re home early,” George says, crossing over to where Dream sits with his legs on the couch. In a moment, he’s maneuvering his knees to rest on either side of his waist and his hands to cup his jaw, thumbs brushing over the points where it connects to his neck. His cheeks are beginning to hurt. There’s warmth beneath his fingertips and the lamps are all on and there’s music filtering out of the sound system on the coffee table. Summer in the middle of autumn.

“Mhm.” Dream leans into it, unflinching despite the cold. “My flight was tomorrow, I know. I got another one.”

“Didn’t you have to pay for that?”

“Yeah, but it’s alright. I wanted to come home.”

George leans forward until Dream’s features blur out of focus, freckles scattering across his vision like grains of sand. “Why?” he asks, cream on his tongue.

“Don’t make me say it.”

“Say it.”

Dream sighs, pushing both hands through his hair even as his eyes shine in the ambience. “Fine. I missed you.”

“Me?” George places a hand over his chest, the corners of his vision glowing gold as lamplight flows around the room. “You were in Vienna, idiot. Surely there were more than enough beautiful things to fill your mind with.”

“God, *sorry*,” he says, words hot against George’s exposed collarbone. “Not everyone is as cultured as you. I was there long enough.”

Tobacco fills his nose when he leans forward to tuck his head under Dream’s jaw, burning pinewood radiating from the fabric of his shirt. “Dream,” he sighs, knotting his fingers into his belt

loops. “You’re supposed to say I’m more beautiful than any of those things,” he says, teasing.

“An oversight on my part.”

“You could always make it up to me.”

“And how would I do that?” Dream’s hands are slipping down now, branding his skin as he touches his shoulders, the dip of his waist, his ass. That’s where they stop. The pressure is light enough that George wants nothing more than to grind back against it, sit up straight on Dream’s lap and press their foreheads together until they’re forgetting all about Vienna and the philharmonic and the millions of lives occurring at the same time as theirs. He wants to be the only two people in the world again, even if for an hour.

But he’s had to wait long enough for this. Surely the payoff will be better if he dances just out of reach and waits until Dream is seeing in shades of red before falling between the sheets. Surely it’s worth waiting.

So he pretends to think for a moment. “Play something with me, virtuoso,” is what he says, before he’s tugging Dream off the couch and into the music room with iron fingers locked around his wrist.

The music room is the heart of their apartment, beating with bars and staves and breves instead of blood and air. Along the walls, there are shelves upon shelves of manuscript, amassed over the decades they’ve been playing violin. But one of the sides is free, since there’s a window positioned in the centre of it. It’s painted black, and perhaps it would give the illusion of night time if light didn’t glow from every pane and more didn’t tumble from the haphazard collection of lamps they’ve crammed in every spare corner. On the floor, there’s a rug Dream fucking hates, and on the rug, there’s a baby grand pressing permanent indents into its surface. Dream fucking hates that too. It fills up the biggest section of the room, and it’d cost more than an entire year of his pay at the time.

And then, on the other side of the piano, rests a violin case covered in stickers. Half of them are wearing off, and the other half are sun-faded so all the colours appear as pastel. That violin case has been around the globe and back. That violin case holds something *George* fucking hated for years and years, since its owner seemed to play it wrong simply to grate at his nerves, pulling a scythe across its strings rather than a bow. That violin case has a grave in this room, since Dream’s upgraded now. There’s a Guarneri from a benefactor in his arms. Dream can loan violins better than George’s because he’s fucking *Dream* and it seems the whole world is in love with him, and then some.

After all, the clouds mourn his disappearance.

George turns away from him. He’s opening an unfamiliar case, one with a blank lid and clasps untouched by years of being dragged around on subways, and George can’t bear to look. In this heart of a room, there lies a grave. The back of his neck crawls.

“You’re not forgetting how to play the violin, are you?” Dream asks when he sits in front of the piano, foot finding the pedal in an instant, fingers finding the keys faster. Up and down, mindless scale after mindless scale as he thinks about what to play.

“Of course not,” he says, hands never leaving the keyboard. Not even when the wrong notes ring out against the black walls. “But I’m done with work for today- oh, let’s play Lalo,” he exclaims, shooting up from the piano stool to find an arrangement of the symphony he has in mind. He’s so busy rummaging through the shelves stacked high with manuscript that Dream’s expression

remains a mystery to him.

Until he turns back around with sheets between his hands, and finds an odd sort of disappointment in Dream's eyes. "Why are you looking at me like that?" he asks.

"Nothing. Just wondering why you'd pick this," Dream says, thumbing through the pages.

"Well. I was thinking about when we were in Paris, actually—"

"That was years ago."

"Yeah, and I was *thinking*," he reiterates, rolling his eyes playfully. "I was thinking about that concert we went to."

"It was shit. You spent the whole time trying to get me to leave so we could have sex in the apartment."

George glares at him. The music opens upon the stand with a flourish, displaying stave lines adorned with dark ornamentation. "I want to play this. Otherwise we can go straight to sleep—I'm sure you're *very* tired after such a long flight."

"Yeah, and you're making me play a symphony, you sadist. Without an orchestra."

"Well. It's your job, isn't it?"

The look is back. The one that pins George to the piano stool and fills him with the feeling of missing a note in rehearsal, the tips of his ears burning hot as he pencils in the correction. Dream is looking at him like he's unravelling the thread of his world with his bare hands, unwinding and unwinding until all that remains is a red tangle on the floor.

Before George can ask what's wrong, Dream is lifting the violin to his shoulder. Not *his*, since this violin belongs to a stranger, placed into Dream's hands because he's most deserving. *His* violin lies on the other side of the room, its frail body whispering of glory days and a past spent cleaving the earth in two. Pulling the blood out of its core. "Let's play," Dream says, nothing more to soften the blow.

"You count."

Dream's teeth flash through the lowlight. "I always do."

The start of the music is marked with an inhale, and it passes between Dream's lips because the clouds mourn his disappearance, and the world loves him. There's no detonation, no flashbang. They play together as though breathing, unaware of the processes which occur to push air in and out of the room as the heart pushes blood in and away, in and away. George's eyelids grow heavy. Dipping and dipping, submerging himself in the current of music for longer like he's stuck in a state of rubato.

Still, his fingers push themselves forwards, and Dream unwinds every note in order to piece it back together with a fragment of himself stuck in the middle. They're both exhausted, so they play until breathing becomes difficult, and they're drowning, drowning, fighting to keep their heads above the surface of sleep and read every dot stamped onto the page. Music filling their lungs, an opiate never quite as explosive as the first time.

"Stop," Dream says at some point, and George finds his eyes half lidded when he turns to look at him.

“We still have an entire movement.”

“I know, it’s just...” Dream trails off, not in an awkward, stuttering way, but in the way the rain dries from the road when the sun reappears. “I’m tired. I know you are too.”

“I’m not,” George says, even as he stifles a yawn in his fist.

“You’re fighting to keep your eyes open.”

It’s true. His lashes obscure his vision, and the edges of the room are swimming around in his periphery, light bending and twisting and writhing as he thinks of piano music drifting through open windows, the grey ribbon of the Seine, bathwater closing over his head. So he accepts defeat. “Maybe we should go to bed.”

“Maybe we should.”

He’s standing, pushing the sheets into one neat pile when Dream appears behind him, sucking on his earlobe, winding his arms around his waist. “I missed you,” he says, before reaching up to feather his fingers over George’s stomach.

“Thought we were going to bed,” he says, but it comes out more strangled than before. It’s difficult to keep his composure when Dream is biting at his neck, gentle enough so he can feel the rasp of his teeth without the risk of burst capillaries. There’s no sting, but it’s nice. It’s nice to stand here with Dream’s tongue sliding over his skin, breath hot against his throat whenever he exhales. Arms steady around his hips.

“We will,” Dream assures. His hands work at the buttons on George’s shirt, prying each one through the hole with practised movements. “But it’s early. There’s time.”

“We stopped playing because you’re tired.”

“This is a little easier than playing.”

“It is?”

“Mmhm. More natural.”

“And here I was, thinking you were born with a—” George breaks off as Dream sits on the piano stool, the hands on his hips guiding him to sit in tandem. His fingers rub at George through his pants, thumb glancing over the head as though he’s done this a million times before. And George supposes he has.

“What was that?”

“Thought you were born with a violin in your hands,” he gasps as his head rests upon Dream’s shoulder, hips grinding in lazy ellipsis in order to chase the slight amount of pressure. He seems determined to string him along, retracting each time George gasps too loudly or reaches back to knot his fingers in Dream’s hair. Which is more often than not—it’s been days and days. Every touch is amplified, and the edges of the room are spinning, and he’s not pressing the piano keys but he can hear the notes anyway, and the oak leaves blur together as he swings back, and forth, and back, and forth. Breaking into the haze as one wears down stiff leather.

What Dream says next makes him sit up straighter, and the sound of his mother calling *you’re too old to be outside* dims to background noise.

“We’re not fated, you know.”

“I don’t believe in fate.”

“I do sometimes. I was supposed to play violin, I think.”

George rolls his eyes even though Dream can’t see it. “Forgot you’re the enlightener.”

“But I had to try and be in love with you,” he says, cupid’s bow sliding against George’s nape. “I had to touch and kiss and break, and break, and break you first. So that’s why I love you more than I love violin. Because we’re not fated, and we’re sitting here anyway.”

“Fucking poet,” George says as he’s standing, hands removing the rest of his clothes so he can sit back down with his skin soft against denim. His feet rest on either side of Dream, providing leverage with which to grind against the problem growing in his jeans. “You’ve been at it for years and you haven’t run out of words.”

“You’re my *muse*, darling.” Dream’s thumbs rub over his hips, over miles of exposed skin flickering with candlelight. A pyre. Both of them tied to it, devilry running through Dream’s veins for playing in a way so inhuman, devilry running through George’s for falling in love with him. They burn, with their hands hot against each other and their lips opening as though to scream. But they’re gasping, in this heart of the home, breathing and alive and surrounded by caskets full of music pencilled within an inch of its life.

Dream touches, and it’s more natural than guiding a bow to violin strings.

The stretch of Dream’s fingers at his entrance is slow this time, slicked with saliva as though they’re fucking animals. He probes around the ring of muscle for a moment, allowing George to lean forward in order to expose himself, hands gripping at the top of the piano in a way he’ll regret once he’s sane enough to really think about it. As it is, violin notes echo around his head. His thoughts flood from the bottom of his brain. Dream pushes until George’s rim is catching upon his knuckle, pushing more against the resistance when it happens.

“You always take so long,” he says with one of Dream’s fingers in him, eyes half shut as he fights the weary pull of the tide, the moon.

“I don’t want to break you.”

“I thought that was the whole point,” he teases, but now there’s a second digit alongside the first, and Dream knows exactly where to direct them in order to make him writhe, make his fingers twitch against the piano.

After coaxing a desperate sob from the depths of George’s being, Dream smiles against his shoulder. “I’m done breaking you.”

You’re my undoing, George wants to scream as he finishes preparing him, broad fingers filling the hole in his heart temporarily. He knows it’ll reopen in the next week, when Dream goes away again. When the lamps go out. But for now, he’s content to sit across his lap and throw his head back, begging Dream to *fucking hurry up* when he twists his fingers against George’s prostate every now and again, painting white over his vision so he can look at the stars imprinted on the insides of his eyelids. *You’re my undoing, you made me like this.*

Now Dream is easing him onto his cock, hands gripping his hips ever so carefully, as though he’s afraid George will shatter into a thousand perfect pieces. Diamond fragments, spilling over the music room floor. Onto the rug he hates so much, casting rainbows over the pattern. Dream is

tugging him downwards, a hand around his wrist like they're travelling to another plane together, to a world of reverie.

He reaches the base, and his marble heart begins to beat. Ivory keys guided by ivory fingers, bloodstained with music.

"Missed you too," he whispers, piano keys blurring together as tears gather in his eyes.

"Are you okay?" Dream asks, pausing for a moment to hold him tight, forehead pressed to his temple. A single tear escapes, and it wets the spot they connect.

"I'm fine. Just quiet when you're not here."

And cold, and dark, and desolate. George isn't sure when peace became detestable, so perhaps he's more like Dream than he thinks.

"I'm here for the rest of the week," Dream promises. "All yours."

"All mine."

Dream fucks him so gently George begins to think he has a new memory to relive when he's playing *Rêverie*. He tries desperately to fuck himself open, but his thighs sting when he pushes too hard. Instead, he relies on hands covered with playing calluses to guide him up and down, both of Dream's thumbs pressing into his lower back with an insistence which gives him no choice but to submit.

So he allows Dream to take him as slow as he wants, gripping the piano tighter each time the head of his cock finds his prostate. It's not so difficult. Dream knows him inside and out, so he knows when to pinch at his nipples, when to bite the top of his neck, when to move a hand from his hip to his cock so they can finish at the same time. Metronomical. Dream knows when George is approaching the edge. His lip is stuck between his teeth, and he's holding onto Dream so hard there'll be bruises in the morning, and the music is tumbling from the stand as his hands grow careless.

Dream finishes with a groan, filling George with himself. There are pages of manuscript fluttering to the floor, so it seems as if the world is falling apart at the edges, the seams bursting as George struggles to contain so much emotion in his chest. He wants Dream to grip him tight, mark him, bite him, bruise him. He wants to see red dripping from the ceiling, and he wants his vision to fail altogether as Dream breaks him.

I'm done breaking you.

As it is, the stimulation against his prostate is gentle, understated. Similar to the most beautiful of piano compositions, simple in nature but effective when played by someone who understands it. Similar to entering a drunken daze, velvet encasing his limbs as he climbs back into bed.

George sets his hand on the keys when he cums, shoulders shooting upwards as dissonance reverberates around them.

Then Dream is laughing, lips pressed to his skin and fingers steady on his thighs. He's laughing like he's drunk, happy and lightheaded. "You're an idiot," he says after a while, "you jumped so hard—"

"I was distracted!" he defends, arms crossing over his chest. Dream's cock slides out of him, and he's empty, and it's too reminiscent of how he feels when the other side of the bed is vacant, so he

wobbles to his feet despite how his thighs shake when he does. “It scared me.”

“I can see that.”

Dream has to hold him upright when they shower, the sound of their laughter echoing from the tiles. It’s better to have two people crammed under the rain head, pushing each other out of the way when goosebumps spread across their arms. Then they’re pushing soap through their hair, giggling some more when Dream manages to get it in his eye.

“You look...*demented*,” George says, fighting laughter as Dream looks at him with one of his eyes redder than the other.

“I’ll let go of you right now,” Dream warns, loosening his grip around George’s waist, “I’ll leave you here all night.”

George huffs. “Like you could ever leave me.”

It’s not until they’re in bed that the haze wears off. George’s world mutes itself once more, and he’s content to lean his head against Dream’s shoulder as he’s flipping through a book with reading glasses perched at the end of his nose. They sit against the headboard, George’s right hand in Dream’s left. The covers reach their waists, but they’re otherwise bare, so their skin is heated where their legs connect.

“Do you think I can become concertmaster?” he asks after a while, his voice barely standing apart from the music emanating from Dream’s phone.

Dream sighs, and his book closes. Then he removes the glasses from his face, a pool of amber light caught in each lens. “Do you know when he’s retiring?” he asks, referring to the leader of the philharmonic.

“No.”

“That would help. And you’re really young, you know. You have years and years to do it.”

George’s stomach twists. “There are younger concertmasters.”

“Isn’t it enough to do something you love every day?”

He falls silent at that. Isn’t it enough to wake up with rain pressing at the windows, isn’t it enough to live on money which doesn’t really belong to him, isn’t it enough to play until the sky turns dark? Isn’t it enough to spend every waking hour *missing* something, and every sleeping hour dreaming of it? His chest is full, but he knows it’ll empty itself before long. A bullet between the ribs, a puncture wound from which to bleed his life force.

Dream doesn’t know what it’s like, since he has rivers beating through cities and new museums and galleries and streetside cafes to keep him company. Dream doesn’t know that George can go days without talking to anyone else. Dream doesn’t know that he stares at his contact page every morning, because his phone never starts ringing.

“It’s enough,” he lies.

It’ll never be enough.

demonology

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There's a twisted sort of attraction to be found in fear. When fear becomes addictive and the object of it becomes necessity, beautiful even in its abhorrence.

It made sense for Dream to crave him, obsess over him, desire and desire and desire to hold George in his arms and sink his teeth into his neck, for George resided somewhere in the figurative clouds over the city, and Dream was afraid of high places. Or perhaps he was afraid of the crest, or the signet, or the violin tucked under George's chin. When Dream first saw his apartment, George didn't miss how he looked around it as though he was expecting the walls to grow teeth.

And just as it was twisted for Dream to fall in love with everything which made his throat dry and his heart stutter, it was twisted for George to love him back, because he'd never liked the dark much. Or the *things* which lived in the dark, the shadows on the walls and the corridor of oil paint contorted into faces and his violin before the sun came up, asking him why he hadn't started playing it yet.

Dream didn't just embrace the darkness, for he was *created* from it. George couldn't help but be drawn to him again and again, fascinated by the way his pulse thrummed and his mind electrified each time Dream glared at him from across the rehearsal hall. It was a high, he supposed. Dream took up so many of his thoughts that it didn't surprise him in the slightest when he ended up in love with him.

It was a matter of inevitability.

So Dream was the darkness, and George the heavens, and they hated, and feared, then loved, then devoted themselves to one another. They played music to a concert hall full of people, and none of them could quite understand what they were witnessing.

They liked it better that way.

You're scared of the dark? he remembers Dream asking, bewildered. Years and years ago, when he still had to travel across the city to squeeze into his tiny bed in his tiny studio apartment and moan about the cold whenever draughts blew under the door. Then Dream would hold him tighter and tell him to stop complaining. And he wouldn't listen, because it would make Dream climb between his legs and fuck him until he forgot all about draughts and blankets and tiny beds and the only thing he remembered how to say was virtuoso. Addictive, since humans are told to fear the supernatural.

Don't laugh.

Dream's face appeared in his periphery then, although his features were hidden by shadow. Moonlight fell through the gap in the blinds, but the feeling of so much darkness flooding around him succeeded in making George's stomach tighten. It was stupid, really—he should've grown out of it years ago. He was expecting Dream to tease him, but there was only the gentle pattern of his breathing against the lower half of his face. *No, it's just...do you want me to turn a light on?*

I'll survive, he said. *It'll just annoy you.*

A beat, then Dream was leaning across him towards the nightstand, and light was filling the room,

and the chain clinging to his neck hovered just above George's skin. *No it won't. I know you only come here because you know I don't like looking out of your windows, idiot. It's just the same.*

Every single night since that, Dream has refused to sleep without the room aglow, no matter how many times George tells him he doesn't care. He takes his face in his palms, presses his lips to George's, tells him he's so used to sleeping with the light on that he does it in every hotel he visits when he's away. George doesn't say he submerges the apartment in darkness whenever Dream isn't there. That would be too much like admitting he misses him.

So he's falling asleep, and Dream's thumbs are rubbing over his bare stomach. Over and over, until the sound of his breath in his ear merges with the sound of piano keys, and his grandparents' house stands at the top of the hill like a warden, and he's trying to find wonderland, or Narnia, or anything to avoid going back inside because it's always so dark—

And Paris returns to haunt him.

A time when their kisses still stung and Dream still played with every shade of night, darkness wrapping around his limbs as the epitome of everything George should've been afraid of. It only pulled him closer. He loved how it burnt, how strong and overwhelming and beautiful love felt when fed by aversion. After all, their love grew from hatred.

George is doomed to blindly chase the high, to replace one darkness with another every time he closes his eyes.

Tonight, it's the symphony.

He's in the Salle Pleyel, but there's an orchestra on the stage instead of Dream, with a soloist he can barely see, and he's sitting at the top of the hall rather than the front. Instead of an empty seat to his right, there is Dream. Their hands connect on the armrest. They're pretending to pay more attention than they actually are, as Dream rubs circles into George's skin and slouches in the seat, chin knocking back for a second to expose the curve of his throat.

"Bored?"

"I don't like Lalo so much."

George hums, and his fingers slip out of Dream's palm to ghost over his forearm. "You know, it's very rude to talk during a concert. You wouldn't like it if people did it to you."

"I would probably try harder to capture their attention."

"Of course you would." He surveys the empty seats around them, and finds the rows punctuated by students, mostly. Students with programmes folded beneath their knees and cases beneath their feet, not so different to how he and Dream must look all the way up here in the very worst seats.

"Although, I don't think anyone can see us..."

"Doesn't make it better, does it? And you started it."

Truthfully, a part of George dies inside at the thought of ignoring etiquette like this, at the thought of sitting at the back of a concert hall and talking through the music as though it isn't worth anything.

But Dream is sitting here with his thighs apart, his hand hot against George's, and something dark in his gaze, so it's a marvel he doesn't fall to his knees immediately. Worship Dream instead of the faceless soloist at the front of the stage. Take him on his tongue, push further and further so he's

not surrounded by the symphony-concerto, but tobacco and vetiver and the smell rosin creates when it sticks to his clothes.

Instead, he presses his lips to Dream's ear, and allows his fingers to wander wherever they want. Down, down, until they're running over the inside of his thigh. "I thought you would like this one," he murmurs, touching higher and higher. Until Dream swallows, the dip of his throat flexing. The red mark on his neck moves with it, and George bemoans his inability to make more, not with the body of a violin, but with his tongue and teeth and lips. .

"Why?"

"It inspired Tchaikovsky, didn't it?"

Dream snorts. "Tchaikovsky and his *favourite student*—" he exclaims as George elbows his side. "What was that for?"

"Just listen." He presses a kiss to Dream's temple, although his hand remains dangerously close to something that would no doubt get him in trouble.

"You're the one who started fucking talking."

And so they pretend to be enraptured by the performance once more. In all honesty, George is less than inspired by the soloist, who moves alongside the music rather than seizing it in both hands and tearing it in two. Dream is a curse. After watching Dream play, it's become impossible to feel satisfaction before the stage if anyone else is standing on it, impossible to sit with his throat closing in on itself as he falls in love with music again and again and again.

Addiction, some would call it. A high impossible to replicate, an object of terror so entrancing George can't do much more but chase, and chase, and chase.

So it doesn't take long for him to rest his head on Dream's shoulder, for his lips to press to his neck and his teeth to lie alongside the red oval. His fingers move higher. Along the seam, up and up, nails rasping against the stitches until—

Dream catches hold of his wrist, and George dreads to think what his expression is like.

"What, exactly, do you suppose you're doing?"

His voice is more beautiful than anything resounding from the stage. George fights the urge to shudder. "Enjoying a concert," he says, pulling his head upwards to smile at Dream.

"Bullshit. You haven't looked at the orchestra once in the last ten minutes."

"I don't listen with my eyes, Dream." He shifts out of Dream's grip so his hand can gravitate downwards. When his palm comes into contact with him, Dream narrows his eyes, expression daring him to fucking take this further.

"George."

"Yes?" His thumb rubs over the growing problem at the front of his jeans, concealed partly by the darkness at the back of the concert hall and partly by the jacket Dream shifts onto his lap to hide the way George is palming him.

Dream exhales. "What are you trying to achieve?"

"I want you to snap," he says without a second of hesitation, "I want you to snap, and then I want to leave this fucking concert so we can return to the apartment. And then...I'm sure you can imagine the rest."

When Dream smiles, it only reaches one side of his face, the corner of his lips pulled up in the way which sends butterflies to beat their wings against the inside of George's stomach. No matter how many times he sees it, George is never quite prepared for Dream to look at him with lust of one sort or another blossoming behind his eyes. Whether it be bloodlust, desire, or love. They don't look so different. "You want to ruin this concert for me, is that it? You want to prove you're more inspiring than all of this?" He jerks his chin in the direction of the stage.

"I am."

Dream's laugh rises from low in his throat. "Bold claim."

"It's true, isn't it?" Now George allows his lips to press over the shell of his ear. "Call me spoiled all you want, Dream. You get on that stage, and you play with pieces of me. I know you do."

"You have a thing for being ruined, don't you? You have a thing for worshipping the things you hate, because it makes you feel fucking *debased*. You like being perfect, because it just means there's more for me to desecrate. You hate it so much that you love it."

He shifts in his seat, hand stilling where it rests over Dream's clothed cock. Because he's under a firestorm, a wretched torrent of words that should make him bow beneath their weight, but instead, he's straining against the front of his pants, hanging onto Dream's every word like it's the goddamn gospel.

And isn't *that* beautiful irony.

"Here's what's gonna fucking happen," Dream continues, grasping George's wrist once more so he can reposition it in his own lap. "There are two movements left, so you're gonna sit there and *behave* until it's over."

He smiles with his teeth. "And then we go back to the apartment."

"God help you when we do."

Predictably, they don't make it to the final movement.

The sound of the orchestra fades as though they've submerged themselves underwater when they leave through the back of the concert hall, Dream's fingers iron around George's. He allows himself to be pulled with a satisfied smile stretched across his lips. An approximation of red floods his periphery as they're exiting the building, the corridors carpeted in it as though the world wants nothing more than to throw itself at Dream's feet. And when they're stepping outside, it's to a darkened sky and a full moon, so perhaps it's not an exaggeration. George can't blame whoever chose the red carpet. He can't blame the sky for growing dark, or the moon for waiting in its darkness, because he'd do the same if it would make the corner of Dream's lips pull upwards.

He throws himself into the back of the car, nails carving crescents into the leather as Dream sits next to him. Paris hums against the windows, each orb of light blurring together every time he blinks. Now the river is filling his vision, water flooding over the street lights and the six story buildings and the stars as they watch the traffic congest at corners. The rest of the drive passes in a fog. In red cheeks and thighs pressed together.

The next time he breaks the surface, he's being pushed against the back of the door. There are

broad fingers in his hair and teeth on his lips, a thigh between his legs and a tongue in his mouth as though Dream wishes to taste his gums. And it's still not *enough*. George wishes to be closer, closer, to be so close he can't tell which inhale is Dream's and which exhale is his own.

"Couldn't fucking wait ten minutes," Dream is saying between each kiss, seizing George's bottom lip with his teeth and pulling until it snaps back into place. "You're spoiled rotten, you know? You have to be the centre of everything."

George's vision blurs as his eyelids slide downwards, each word only making his desperation crescendo. "I couldn't help it," he gasps, because Dream is sucking at his neck as if to maul him.

"You couldn't help it."

"No. You were looking at me in that- in that *way* you do."

"What way?" Dream's hands move lower to tear George's shirt out of his pants, fingers unbuttoning it with the precise movement of someone who spends eight hours a day pressing the fingerboard.

"Like you want to shatter me."

"To put it lightly."

Now Dream pulls him further into the apartment, an unorchestrated waltz of limbs and teeth as they kiss and kiss, struggling to pull their clothes off and discard them to the floor. When Dream pushes him onto the bed, George is all exposed limbs and red cheeks, hands reaching up to cover his face.

Dream pulls them away by the wrists. "Oh, you're embarrassed now? You didn't seem so embarrassed when you were trying to make me pay attention to you instead of the orchestra."

"Sorry." His eyes slip shut, anything to avoid the intensity of Dream's stare as his eyes focus directly on his. It's so much. George is certain Dream could let go of his wrists, remove his weight from his hips and he'd be pinned to the mattress by his gaze alone.

"You haven't been very well behaved," Dream growls, sucking a bruise below George's jaw until it flashes with stinging pain. He draws away, and saliva strings between the pair of them. "Have all your lessons in decorum taught you nothing?"

"I just-" George gasps, struggling to piece sentences together as Dream moves lower, lower, teeth catching against his ribs before a bite is sunk above his hip. "I don't give a fuck about etiquette right now. You make it difficult to care."

"As touching as that is—" Dream hooks his thumbs under the waistband of his boxers, skin burning against his own— "I think we both know why we came back here." And now he's pulling, revealing more and more of George until there's nothing to separate him from Dream's appraisal.

Dream releases him for a moment, removing his clothes to reveal skin branded with the shadows of George's nails and lips and teeth. "Kneel," he says.

The world spins out of focus for a moment, desperate to comply as he is. George pushes himself to his knees in the centre of the bed so the street light falls across his body in pulsing rivulets which drift in time with the movement of the curtains. He's trembling, although not from the cold. He's trembling because there's something he's waiting for Dream to see, trembling with the heavy anticipation of it as Dream shifts to sit behind him, a dip of the mattress the only giveaway he's

moved at all.

They don't use toys so often—George prefers the feeling of Dream's bare hands against his skin, his fingers hot against his insides. Dream likes it better that way too. There's something ritualistic about skin to teeth, teeth to skin, touching each other with the same arms and the same hands they use to *perform*. As if they're nothing but extensions of it.

So every time they've used something, it's a rare occasion, and it's put back in the drawer afterwards like a bad piece of music. George misses the feeling of playing calluses too much. Dream misses leaving handprints all over George, red for blood. George misses twisting his head towards the mirror in the early light of morning to see them, to run his fingers over every mark and bruise and bite with a gasp when he pushes too deep.

But it's *so fucking worth it* to hear Dream curse under his breath when he sees the plug settled in George's hole. His thumb brushes over the base, and even the ghost of pressure makes George impossibly harden against his stomach. "Fuck," Dream repeats, nails pressing into his hips.

"Do you like it?" he asks, even as his cheeks warm.

"Did you?" Dream leans forward, and his breath is hot against George's nape. "Did you enjoy sitting at the back of that concert hall, all plugged up? Did it make you feel a fucking shred of impurity?"

George swallows the whine pressing at the back of his throat. Instead, he angles his face downwards to disguise the pinkness of his cheeks, the burning red at the tips of his ears.

"It's a shame, really," Dream says, and now his fingers are wrapping around George's throat, and his skin is hot against his jaw, and he's reminded why he doesn't normally do this. It's how Dream feels inside him, opening him up for the hundredth time. It's how Dream presses a hand flat against the small of his back as he does it—the only thing tethering him to the corporeal world.

A shame, indeed. He mourns the loss of something he took from himself, the height of self-sabotage.

"Why?"

"Because I don't think you deserve to get what you want."

"How so?"

Dream's words are low in his throat, the sweetest movement of a symphony before the climax occurs. "Since you seem a little preoccupied," Dream murmurs, soft enough that George's head tips back against his shoulder. His fingers trace the base of the plug. "I think you should fuck me."

Fuck, if that doesn't make George's stomach tighten. Because fucking Dream is a different type of debasement, one that requires calculated effort as he gives and gives and gives in the mere *hope* of providing enough. There's no room to lie amongst the pillows and scream every time Dream pushes him over the edge, because fucking Dream requires George to break himself. And it's addictive, because he'd do it forever if Dream asked. He'd do it even with tears streaming over his cheeks, frustrated to the point of insanity by Dream's disinterested expression.

Evidently, he remains silent for a little too long, since Dream is dragging his fingers over each of his ribs and sucking a bruise so high on his neck it kisses his jaw. It'll be hell to cover up. Then again, George likes walking around with marks of possession red against his marble skin, things to remind him Dream is *his his his* and the rest of the music world can grovel at his feet. "Or are you

too precious for that, concertmaster? Are you too accustomed to having everything served on a silver fucking platter?”

“No,” he gasps, eyes blown wide. “I want to, please, *please*—”

Dream swallows his pleas on his tongue, one hand knotted in his hair and the other dropping to rest just above the curve of his ass like a threat. When they break apart, saliva strings between them. Paris washes them with gold, giving their limbs the impression of being bronzed in a way George thinks would put Euterpe to shame. “Sure?” he asks, gaze softening for a moment.

George fights the urge to roll his eyes. “I’ve done it before. I *like* it.”

“Mmm. Think I promised something first though.”

The retort forming in his mind dies as Dream’s hand slips lower. It squeezes at his ass slowly, so the pressure begins as nothing, before it sharpens into a very real, very tangible actuality. Then he’s pushed forwards into the pillows, cheek pressing against the bed linen as though to remind him his skull is so, so, breakable. Of course, Dream would never hurt him. But there’s something so wonderful about knowing he *could*, about taking all of his trust with both hands and giving it to this devil of a man, giving it to his virtuoso because he knows how to make beauty from it.

“Good?” Dream asks, settling a palm on the jut of his hip. They’ve been together for months and months, sleeping together for longer, so he’s well accustomed to how George’s demeanour shifts when it’s too much. Still, he asks every time, and George sort of wants to kiss him stupid.

Fucking do it, he wants to scream, but he hold his tongue. He knows it’ll only make Dream wait longer.

“I’m good,” he says, stomach tightening in anticipation. “You knew that, really.”

“Of course. But it’s nice to ask, isn’t it?”

“Shut up,” he grits, allowing his back to bow downwards more as though it’ll make Dream stop taking his sweet time. “I’ll be concertmaster by the time you fucking start.”

He expects Dream to draw it out longer, run his fingers over his most delicate skin until he’s trembling. So the first hit startles him, resounding in the quiet of the apartment. There’s a moment of disbelief before the sting hits him, a raw ache settling into the surface of his flesh as he squeezes his eyes shut and begs for more, and more, and more.

“This gets me every fucking time,” Dream says, low enough George almost misses it.

“Hmmm?”

“How much you love this.” His hand collides with him again, and a broken gasp is wrenched from his lungs. “You’re just so fucking *refined*, concertmaster. Who’d know you just wanna be slapped dumb, huh?”

He whines, and the heat is spreading down his neck, across his chest, until he feels as though he’ll ignite.

The firm contact of Dream’s palms against his skin makes George drift away, away, until his mind is nothing but teeth and tongue and bruises and *Dream*. Dream treats him like he treats his music, bending and breaking and reshaping with hands sent straight from the depths. But rather than bestowing his attention on the greats, on the plethoras of symphonies and sonatas and concertos

and serenades filling the world, he bestows it on George.

George has never felt so loved.

This is why he begs for more, begs for Dream to hit him harder, mark him with deep red, make George into his own creation. *More* he whispers like a prayer, desiring nothing more than to be broken in the most perfect way.

Break me again and again, break me however you want. Break me to create something beautiful with the pieces.

When Dream's lips press to his temple, his mind is so strung apart that he doesn't register what he's whispering at first. There is only the heat of his arms around his waist, the blissful slide of Dream's fingers over the plug, the press of his nose to his forehead.

"That's enough," he hears when the world sharpens. It's a murmur, accompanied by hot air against his skin. "So pretty for me, so pretty all marked up like this."

"Pretty," he repeats, glowing under the praise. He's pretty, even to someone like Dream, who is so beautiful George himself can't help but conflate it with the supernatural. How else would he perform as though possessed? George leans into his touch, shifting his head to one side so Dream can trace his mouth over his neck and kiss with his lips closed, an artist worshipping the creation over and over and over.

Now Dream guides his own fingers to his hole as he sits up, thighs parted so George can see the red press of his cock to his stomach. It taunts him, in a way. Today is not for resting his limbs, today is not for pulling Dream inwards and inwards as though he wishes to commit a fusion of their souls. Today is for taking himself apart, reliving how it feels to be commanded to play like he's a marionette. Unsatisfactory cadenzas, rain sodden notes, the curve of Dream's lips as he watches his destruction.

George isn't allowed to touch while Dream preps himself, condemned to lie amongst the pillows with his cock straining scarlet against his stomach. He craves to reach out and grasp Dream's with his fingers, but he knows it won't end well. So he sits, and waits. No matter how much he shakes with want.

"Okay," Dream says, pulling him from his reverie. His fingers retract from his hole, shining with lube in a way which makes George's vision prickle around the edges. "You know what to do."

He doesn't need to be told twice. With the motion of a man driven half-mad, George pushes Dream to lie on the bed and attaches their lips, so sloppy it's a wonder Dream doesn't swat at his ass for the click of their teeth. There's so much red, and he drinks it like wine. Red blossoming across his ass, red pooling on his cheeks, at his cock, red kisses trailing down his neck, across his collarbones, and red as his lip splits with fervour.

"Careful," Dream chides, pulling away to press his thumb against George's tongue. His lips envelop it as Dream's thighs press at his hips and his cock presses at the cleft of his ass, skin meeting in so many places it squeezes his mind in the fragile parameters of its skull. "You'll hurt yourself."

"Please," he mutters, punctuated with Dream's fingers tipping from his mouth. "Please, I want to-*inside-*"

Now Dream pulls him in by his nape. "Fuck me," is what he says, "fuck me until you can't hold

yourself up anymore.”

Who is George to deny him that?

He pushes in slowly, moaning as Dream’s hole catches the tip of his cock, because it’s so hot and it’s *everywhere* and he’s biting at his bottom lip to keep himself from fucking screaming. With each rock of his hips, Dream remains composed. George pushes deeper and deeper, walking himself into the recesses of sin, and Dream holds him through it, one hand in his hair and the other between his shoulder blades.

His lungs burn. With each thrust, George becomes less and less refined, exactly as Dream likes. He wishes more than anything to make Dream’s eyes roll up in his head, to make Dream grip his wrists hard enough to hurt, but instead he merely exhales when George brushes past what he’s looking for. And he’s an image of composure, juxtaposing George’s heaving chest, red cheeks, hair sticking to his forehead in dark curls.

“I’m close,” he gasps, fucking faster and faster as he chases release to the brink. Even if it means he’s less controlled, missing Dream’s prostate more often than he hits it because he’s just so *desperate* and he thinks he’ll be driven mad if he doesn’t cum.

“You’re close?”

“So close,” he repeats. Dream’s hole clings to him, walls tight enough around him to tint his vision red.

“Stop.”

George’s hips halt, commanded by nothing but the steady tone of Dream’s voice as he swipes a thumb over George’s bottom lip. There’s nothing in his mind which makes him do it. But the way Dream speaks is impossible to avert, impossible to do anything else but listen because if thousands of people can clamour at his feet in world class auditoriums, George is no more likely to ignore him. So he stops, and hot wetness spills over his cheeks.

“Why?” he tries to ask, but the word snaps in half.

Dream’s fingers are strong in his hair, rough as they pull his head up to meet his gaze. “Why? Because you just look so lovely like this, desperately trying to fuck me. I want to watch for longer.”

“But—”

“Start again,” Dream says, shifting his grip to George’s neck. He doesn’t squeeze, doesn’t push, but the feeling of his palm ghosting above the jugular is enough to make George fall still. “Start again, and try a little harder this time.”

“I can’t.” His head drifts to rest against Dream’s chest, shoulders heaving as he struggles to support himself. It’s confusing, because he knows he has the strength in his arms to keep going, to pull himself upright and fuck Dream until they’re both finishing in a burst of white, but there’s an ache across his ass, acid pooling at his joints, jaw hanging open as he claws for air against the gentle pressure of Dream’s hand on his throat. And it’s so much. He feels like manuscript being torn to pieces.

They must be cut out for one another, wretched heart to wretched heart, because Dream knows. He knows.

He knows, so George is guided onto his back, one hand beneath his head and the other flat against

his chest, and Dream is situating himself on top of him, and sinking down, down, down. Somehow, it's more like this. It's more, with Dream using him as though he's just another thing to break. It's more, as Dream opens himself on George's cock again and again and again. It's more, because he's cursing under his breath, gaze fixated on the bites covering George's body, and it's more, as he shatters him like he does with all the things he loves.

"I love you," he says when he finishes, because Dream doesn't care much about doing the done things or saying what he's supposed to. He'll say it during sex if he wants to, uncaring of how vulgar it is.

And George.

George doesn't orgasm with perfect clarity, but the knot in his stomach unravels at some point, and he's filling Dream all he can with cracked lips pressed to his temple and salt in his vision. His nails drag over Dream's back, earning him a hiss. There'll be time to apologise later, when Dream twists to look at the scratches in the mirror, but for now he's somewhere in the atmosphere as his eyes roll back and his thighs shake with the force of it.

Then he breathes.

Dream breathes with him, as if they're counting in for something, preparing to dance and dance in the tide of music.

"George," Dream calls after a while, allowing George's cock to slip out of him as he arranges his limbs on the mattress. There are palms cupping his cheeks, and lips pressing to his, and it's perfect. Paris beats around them. Their hearts thrum in their chests, constrained only by the cages of their ribs.

"I'm fine," he says, before Dream can ask. "Just sleepy."

"Then sleep," is the reply. Dream reaches to coax the plug from his hole, but George's eyelids are so weighted he barely registers its removal. There's violin music emanating from somewhere. He's unsure as to whether the source is inside himself, or whether it's coming from the city, drifting along each lamplit street to sing to him. Too soft to be Dream's playing, too fluid to be his own, so heartbreakingly beautiful a strange urge to weep bubbles in his chest.

Before he can ask, the mattress begins to feel more like water, and the hum of the traffic fades, and his feeling narrows down to the rhythm of Dream's heart in his fingertips. *His heart*, all the same.

The bed is empty when George wakes. The rain pours, the earth turns, the air caught in his chest floods over his lips in one exhale.

For a while, he struggles to sort unconsciousness from waking, reality from reverie. For a while, he

thinks he's woken up in the wrong universe. One where Dream is still in Vienna, taking his soul out to display to an audience full of foreign faces. His hands stretch to either side of him, and he finds the sheets next to him are still warm, and there's amber light cast over his face from the lamp on the nightstand, and his heart is not made of marble but red flesh as it thrums between his ribs. And somehow, it doesn't sedate the sensation that he's in someone else's body.

With the weariness of blinking his eyes open after sleeping half a night, George notices the violin music. It's muffled by the wall, muffled more by the rain. But it resounds nonetheless, with notes pried from the strings by calloused fingers and arched wrists.

He swings his legs over the edge of the bed and pulls a robe over his skin, for the apartment is too frigid to walk around bare in the autumn. Frigid, dark. There's a nagging at the back of his mind as he steps into the amalgamation of a kitchen-diner-living room, because all the lamps are dead and the only light spills from the cracked door of the music room, accompanied by the continual resonance of violin strings. It reminds him of being half his size and terrified out of his mind. Terrified of the faces on the wall, of the emptiness of his parents' room, of the staff appearing at the end of the hall and seeing him out of bed.

He shakes his head. He's a fucking adult, and it's not the dark he needs to be wary of.

As he stands outside the door, George's stomach twists itself into knots. Dream's playing is so very different from how it used to be, perhaps indistinguishable to the casual listener, but amplified in George's mind by his intimate familiarity with the way Dream plays. It doesn't sound like it's torn and jagged around the edges. It doesn't sound *angry*, it doesn't sound like untamed virtuosity spilling across the strings.

It's a good different, he thinks. The sort of different which makes audiences leave with stars clouding their eyes and a strangling sense of dread clutching their throats, for how can they amount to anything significant when there are people in the world who perform as though put on the face of the earth by fate?

George is struck with the realisation one of the greatest violinists of their time is performing in his music room, and he feels smaller than he has in his life.

And because he can't bear to listen any longer, he slips through the door. It shuts behind him to alert Dream of his presence.

Dream stops now, bowing arm falling to his side as he turns to face George with weary eyes and orange light igniting one half of his face. He smiles. He smiles instead of glaring, and it doesn't seem as though he's frustrated with George for interrupting him in the middle of a sonata. As though he wasn't performing something worthy of being recorded and immortalised to nobody but the stars, and the street outside the open window, and the moon as she slumbers behind the clouds.

"What are you doing?" George asks, disconcerted.

"I like to play at night. When I can't sleep."

As though George hasn't heard him doing it hundreds of times before.

"Strange," George says, stepping further into the room with his hands clutching at his robe. One eyebrow quirks upwards in amusement. "It seemed to me like you were playing in the morning. I thought the night electrified you."

Dream tips his head back, laughs. It's just as subdued as the music, with no sharp edges. "It's not

that sort of piece. The night isn't inherently violent, you know."

Starlit practise rooms, moonlight falling over his face as he's pushed to his knees, darkness coiling at the bottom of his stomach while he worships sin, kisses bloodstained hands with a red lust for more. Gorging himself until he's bursting, throwing his hands up and denouncing perfection if tasting Dream is this good. Paris pressing at the windows as he's slapped red. That's what night is. Night makes everything forgivable, so there's no need to play as though standing in a cathedral.

"What is night?" he dares to ask.

Now Dream is resting the violin on the open case, gently, gently, similar to the way he'd held George's hips in front of the piano just hours earlier. George knows it's worth millions, but it's disconcerting nevertheless. Dream isn't supposed to do things *gently*, isn't supposed to perform arias as though standing in Persephone's garden, isn't supposed to kiss his neck sweetly and breathe with the same delicacy as wings across his skin. Dream isn't supposed to taste like milk and fucking honey, Dream isn't supposed to be standing in this heart of a room as though the pages of manuscript croon lullabies to him.

Dream is supposed to cleave the ground in two, reanimate the dead.

How else is he supposed to make a marble heart beat? Marble needs to be battered and bruised in order to move, not cradled in his palms and held to his ribs.

Dream takes George into his arms now, pulls him to his chest so he can feel his pulse steady against his back. It mocks him. He's being embraced as though he is the violin, he thinks as Dream's hands fit into the curves of his sides, his thumbs pressing to his hip bones. Air rushes over the exposed plane of his neck, and streetlight falls in through the windows to douse them in pale yellow. Lovers by choice.

"I changed my mind about night," Dream says, lips moving against George's skin. "I lie next to you at night, and the streetlamps paint you gold, and you look as if you are glowing inside. You know there are flowers which stay closed during the day, but relax their petals at night? I think that's what it reminds me of."

George's cheeks remain muted pink. "We have done so many hellish things at night," he says, disengaging himself from Dream's arms and turning so he might face his lover and desperately search for things he recognises. Bruised knees, red skin, deserted concerts, lilies left in the road. "You mean to tell me how I look when I'm fucking *asleep* is more inspiring than that?"

"It's different." Dream's thumbs reach up to press over his cheekbones. "We're not like that anymore."

"Like what?"

"Well, you know. Dramatic."

A fissure opens in the marble, a clean split which branches out into hundreds. Because they're different now, with soft kisses and pulses beneath their ears and the stars gazing through a window they've paid for together while they sleep in each other's arms. And an empty apartment, and days stretching out on a calendar, and rain pushing against the glass, and music gentle enough to be played to the deathbed. George doesn't want to think about what it's for.

He smiles anyway. It's closer to morning than he'd like, and he knows how night makes things seem worse than they are. Perhaps they'll wake up in a few hours' time and the sun will warm their

faces and paint the backs of their eyelids red just the way they're comfortable with. Perhaps Dream will hold him so tight it hurts, bite his skin until it bruises. And perhaps, perhaps, the music will cease to haunt him.

So he says, "I'm tired."

"Then sleep, darling."

"Are you coming with me?"

"Would you like me to?"

His eyes roll upwards. "I wouldn't have said it if I didn't," he teases, before he turns to reach for the door with the night casting shadows over the jut of his wrist.

"I'll be one minute," Dream calls, and George can hear him setting the violin back in its case. "I can't leave this out, I think I'd die if anything happened to it."

George doesn't mention that he could pay for that violin several times over, because they're both aware of it. He abandons the robe and climbs back into bed. Before long, there are footsteps approaching the door, and Dream is closing it behind him, pulling the shirt he's wearing over his head so George can see the sunspots dotted over his shoulders.

When Dream lies next to him, George pushes himself up. "What are you doing?" he asks, with a smile that looks funny next to the crease of his eyebrows.

"You know, I've been dreaming a lot recently." George sits himself with his knees on either side of Dream, leaning forward to kiss at the area above his collarbone. He allows his teeth to catch on his neck, gentle enough to test the water.

"Of what?"

"Paris."

Dream laughs under his breath, and George feels it resonate in his palms, in the stretch of his thighs across Dream's hips. "That was years ago."

"Do you remember much about it?" Now he takes the skin between his teeth, pulling just so that Dream's breath catches in his throat.

"God, yeah," he groans, an arm falling across his face. "That fucking symphony—I mean, it's more of a concerto, to be fair."

"Yeah? Anything else?"

Dream seems to understand what he's getting at, because he exhales through his nose. "Hey," he says, pulling George tight to his chest. Tight to the extent he can feel his heartbeat, but not tight enough to tear their bones through skin until their skeletons can revel together. "It's late."

"Evidently not too late to play violin."

"I can do that by myself, you know. I don't want to keep you awake." Even with Dream's fingers gentle against his scalp, George can't help but feel as if he's been deserted. Since Dream does not play with the broken pieces of him anymore, and he does not think of George with red marks all over his skin when he performs. George doesn't ask what he thinks of in its place. He suspects he

wouldn't like the answer.

"So?" He lifts his head and finds Dream gazing at him without an ounce of fear. An addict once, an addict no more. "I'm never tired in the mornings."

"Yes you are. You've just had years to learn to hide it. And you'll wake up in—" Dream glances at the clock on George's nightstand, illuminated by the lamp— "three hours exactly, just like you do every day. So it would be better if you got some sleep, wouldn't it?"

He huffs a laugh. "Since when did you care?"

Dream stills beneath him. When he raises his gaze, Dream's lips are twisted downwards, and his fingers fall open, empty. "I can't believe you just asked me that."

"Sorry," he says, unnerved by how Dream's eyes ice over. And if there's one thing that disconcerts him, makes him feel as though he's stepped through the looking glass into another dimension, it's coldness emanating from Dream's every pore. "I know you do. 'm just sleepy."

There's stillness for a horrible moment. Then Dream's lips are pressing to the crown of his head, and his arms are winding around George's waist to press their skin together in all the places it remains bare. Dream hums under his breath, throat vibrating above George's head. "I'll still be here in the morning, idiot. Stop clinging to me like I won't be," he says, because George has his shirt in a death-grip.

"Maybe I just like holding something while I sleep."

"However do you cope while I'm abroad?" Dream asks sarcastically, but it only makes the pit of George's stomach swirl with unease.

I don't.

He doesn't say it, because Dream knows how to exist without him, how to play without thinking about him, and George is stuck with an addiction which threatens to eat him alive. When the wildfire burns itself to embers, he suspects not even his bones will be left behind.

The rest of the week is lovely.

Rather than rainclouds blotting the sky grey and brown, George wakes with sunlight falling over his face and Dream's arm falling over his waist, the sheets crumpled around his bare hips. When he attends rehearsal, the sky is glazed blue and he's more open to engaging in small talk, for he doesn't have an empty apartment to return to afterwards. The shower doesn't run cold, and they drink wine in the evenings.

It's a week of kisses stained red. If George closes his eyes, he can imagine the tartness of it is something closer to lips bitten bloody.

Dream's touch remains the same. Palms pressed over his hips, forearms gentle against his stomach,

warm kisses pulling him from city streets each time he wakes, a thumb settling at the base of his ring finger. George can't remember the last time Dream pushed him against the wall and kissed him with his teeth, or the last time he woke up covered in bruises of devotion. He can't remember when Dream became so fucking *gentle*.

Or why he'd failed to notice when it happened.

The gradation of it isn't something he's used to. He's not used to falling into hatred, or love, or domesticity. George can't help but feel like he's digging his heels in as hard as he can but is slipping towards the void anyway, the void being the point Dream loses interest in him entirely and realises there's no lack of extraordinary violinists in their strange little world to become fascinated with instead.

He thinks this in the middle of the week, when they're having breakfast at the street-side cafe they visit every so often. Usually when Dream is feeling nostalgic, since it's where they went the morning after George performed Sibelius' second symphony, the morning after Dream fucked him with their lips attached, holding onto him as a believer clings to a crucifix. Coincidentally the morning after the last time he stepped on stage a concertmaster. Something about it makes him think of himself as a failure as he sits here, with a cup in his hands and acid swirling in his stomach.

"I'm going for longer this time," Dream is saying, and the fire surrounding him comes in the form of autumn leaves drifting to the pavement. It was blossom season the first time they came here, so Dream spent half of breakfast leant over the table to pluck the petals from amongst his hair. George prefers the orange. "I'm sorry."

"I know you are." He sets his cup down with a furrowed brow. "I look at your schedule, believe it or not."

I agonise over it.

"Right. You can come with me if you want? You were talking about Paris this week, and...I don't know, it just seemed like you wanted to um, go away again. It'll be nice."

He sighs. His fifth finger traces around the rim of his cup, and his reflection stares back at him, although the tea makes the world appear brown and murky. "I can't. I have rehearsals, Dream."

"Not even for a weekend? It's not like you can't afford it. Fuck, I'll pay if you want, I don't care."

George hides a smirk in his palm. "That *won't* be necessary. I have more money than I know what to do with."

"I know, but I want you there. Something about the sentiment of it, right?"

"Shut up, I know you just want me there so you don't have to sleep in some fucking hotel. You've acquired a taste for expensive things, haven't you?" Expensive things like his violin, like aged wine and apartments tucked away in the hearts of foreign cities. Perhaps it's not surprising, since he's tasted George in so many places.

Dream gasps in mock offence. "I would never do that. Besides, there are plenty of things to do in Prague like, uh—"

"Dream, I *can't*," he says with a laugh, reaching across the table to take his hands. With orange leaves raining from the sky, they sit with empty plates and cups warm to the touch. Their legs tangle under the table. "I need to work, or I'll never be concertmaster."

“One weekend isn’t gonna change anything, I promise.”

And now there’s an itch sparking somewhere between his ribs, and he realises he’s sitting here with Dream as the world slumbers on around them instead of perfecting repertoire, pulling notes from the fingerboard until darkness arrives. “That’s easy for you to say.” His throat is tighter than before. There’s a weight pushing at his shoulders. As though he’s one of the leaves being ushered towards the pavement as they turn from green to brown, decay eating away at their veins because it’s impossible to stay new forever. “You’re a *prodigy*, and I’m not, and I need every fucking hour I can have because I’ll amount to nothing otherwise—”

“Hey, breathe. You’re panicking.” Dream’s thumb is at his ring finger again, rubbing the spot as though there are diamonds George can’t see settled at the bottom. When George’s shoulders begin to rise and fall at regular intervals, he says, “do you remember how we met?”

“At the Menuhin,” he mumbles after a moment. “You hated me. I hated that I had to try to hate you back.”

“People don’t meet at the fucking Menuhin unless they’re prodigies, George,” he says, shifting so he can interlace their fingers. George’s cup is long-forgotten, tea cooling against the bottom. “I mean it. You would’ve been performing that concerto if I wasn’t at that school, seriously. I guess that’s just unfortunate.” Although his expression screams the opposite, with his soft eyes and lips pulling upwards. Something about fate, George would hazard. Fate driving them into each other’s arms, a love more volatile than it would be if they grew into it naturally.

“You said I was pulling strings, as I recall.”

Dream exhales. “Except your family didn’t *know* about any of that, because you never told them, and they never cared enough to ask. I know you didn’t do shit. I think I believe it more than you do.”

“Anyone can be a prodigy with enough money.”

“Then why aren’t your siblings like you? Why is your sister so fucking jealous of you—”

“Okay, enough.” He releases Dream’s hands and draws his arms around himself, unnerved. The sea feels too close all of a sudden, a grey stretch of water reaching all the way back home, to freezing corridors and silent rooms due to the private flights escorting their occupants to places far more important than George. “Are you done? I’m getting cold.” After a moment of hesitation, he shivers for emphasis.

“Just wear this,” Dream says, passing him his jacket.

George turns it over in his lap. He’s surprised it’s still in one piece, and his nose wrinkles as his nails draw over the stitching. “This is getting disgusting,” he says, eyeing the frayed edges of each patch. “You’ve had it since you were a teenager.”

“So? As long as it’s not falling apart it’s good, right?”

Clearly they have very different definitions of what *falling apart* constitutes. “You’re almost thirty, Dream.”

He’s expecting Dream to deny it further, to insist it’s good for a while longer. Instead, he tips his head to one side, thoughtful. “Okay. You can get me a new one for Christmas. I’ll wear it, promise.”

“Why don’t you just buy one in Prague?”

“Because it’s sweet if you pick something for me.”

“Romantic,” he deadpans.

“Why do you hate giving me things so much?”

He shuffles in his seat, pulling the jacket on after a moment. As soon as it’s settled over his shoulders, he’s overwhelmed with the smell of Dream’s cologne, and he buries his nose into the denim without shame. “It just seems superficial,” he says, although it comes out muffled. The more he inhales, the more he can smell lingering cigarette smoke, almost entirely gone since Dream doesn’t smoke anymore. Another addiction he’s lost, George supposes. “I could buy you any number of expensive things, so it doesn’t exactly mean much. How am I supposed to convey something as complicated as love with material things?”

“Come on. You’re not buying me things instead of loving me. It’s not like you’re—”

“No,” George cuts him off before he can say it. “Not this again. “

“Sorry. You know I don’t like your parents much.”

George hums, chewing at his lower lip until it smarts. “They like you a lot,” he says truthfully. Dream knows how to be polite, and George has come to realise his displays of hatred are reserved only for those he cares enough about to be honest with. People worth his time.

“No. They like that I’m a world-class violin soloist. It’s interesting, I guess.”

“That explains a lot,” he mumbles.

“Huh?”

“Nothing. We should go home,” he says, standing from the seat and waiting for Dream to do the same. Their hands link as though magnetised, an action more practised than their footsteps.

The city pays them no mind as they walk further into it, hurrying across the streets whenever there are breaks in the traffic. And they could be driven back, but then they wouldn’t be able to feel the wind pulling their hair and the threat of rain lingering overhead. Dream’s hand in his, Dream’s jacket falling off his shoulders. So much Dream it chokes him. Even if Dream won’t do it physically.

They’re content with silence. So much of their relationship is shaped by sound—be it the pouring of music or, when they were younger, the impact of Dream’s hands with his skin—so it’s nice to simply exist alongside each other, if only for a moment. The hum of the traffic drowns out George’s overspilling of thoughts. And it’s not until they’re waiting by a street corner that he speaks again, voice scratching with temporary disuse.

“I’ll get you a Christmas present this year,” he says, huddled close to Dream’s side as though confessing a secret.

“He sees the light!” Dream exclaims, swinging their hands back and forth in excitement.

“Fucking idiot.”

But he’s smiling, hopeful that there’ll be a Christmas for them. Hopeful they can watch the snow

fall against the windows and erect a tree in the apartment, hopeful Dream will laugh at him when he has to stand on the sofa in order to place the star at the top, all the lamps lit and cinnamon bubbling on the stove. Hopeful Dream will play to him in the evening, hopeful the mulled wine will excuse how lethargic it sounds.

The smile drops from his face within the next few blocks. There are rain clouds drawing together like grey curtains, reminding him that Dream is away from home more often than not, and the Christmas decorations in Paris, or Prague, or Vienna must make their string lights seem awful in comparison.

It's only a matter of time before he pieces it together.

George clings to him harder, wishing and wishing he could turn time backwards, flip the hourglass over to something more familiar. Because hatred breeds obsession, and without hatred, there's nothing left to tie Dream to their sad little apartment in sad, grey, raintrodden New York.

"You need this," George says as he walks into their bedroom, Dream's most stretched shirt folded in his hands.

Dream is kneeling in the middle of the floor with a case open in front of him, hands rifling through his clothes to double, triple check he's packed his concert attire. The bed is unmade, and George knows if he were to stick his nose into the sheets they would smell of sleep and skin stuck together. Dream turns towards him. "Where did you find that?" he asks, stretching a hand out to take it. "Wait, how did you even know I'd want it?"

"The dryer, idiot. And it's your flight shirt."

"Oh. Thank you." Dream tosses it to the floor on his side of the bed, where it lands in a crumpled mess. He'll put it on in the morning, but George can't help but cringe.

"I just folded that," he says, exasperated.

"And I unfolded it."

"Come on." He walks over to where it lies, folding it back into a neat square and setting it atop the dresser. The surface of it is a mess, with rings left loose and earrings with the backs missing left to their own devices. There are two bottles of cologne, one the sort that costs five hundred fucking dollars for a thimbleful, and the other with tinted glass casting light refraction around where it stands.

George takes the green bottle with pursed lips and passes it to Dream. "You're terrible at this," he says. "Even after so many years of doing it."

"That's alright. I have you to help me."

He huffs. "One day I'm going to let you forget your violin, I swear."

Dream pulls him onto the floor, arms wrapping around his shoulders to pull them chest to chest, and his forehead meets the juncture between his neck and collarbone. “Then I’d just have to come home early. *However* would I cope?” Now there are lips pushing at the crown of his head, over and over and over. Soft enough to make his eyes slip shut.

“True. Maybe I’ll do it tomorrow—hide it or something.”

“I’m leaving at five,” Dream says, fingers reaching under George’s shirt to splay across his stomach. “You sleep like a corpse, no way in hell you wake up before you have to.”

“I will,” he promises.

In the morning, it turns out Dream is correct, as he often is.

George wakes to the sound of his alarm, although it takes him a further five minutes to blindly fumble around for it on the bedside. Silence falls across the room, only broken by the wind pushing against the windows as though it wishes to shatter them into fragments. And the bed is freezing. It’s five past six in the morning, and the lamp is still on, and Dream’s shirt isn’t on the dresser. If he’s wistful enough, George imagines he can feel the impression of warm lips against his forehead, his cheeks, the bridge of his nose, the tip of his cupid’s bow. He wonders if Dream really kissed him before leaving.

If he occupies the same amount of space in Dream’s mind as he does in George’s.

He rolls back over. A yawning pit opens in his stomach for the hundredth time, although it seems to grow with every instance of Dream disappearing while he’s asleep.

The night is violent, he thinks, no matter how Dream attempts to convince him otherwise. Night shows him things he can no longer have, night takes the agent of them from him, night makes him sit in the dark with his shoulders trembling and the lamp too far to reach. He never stopped being afraid of the dark. If anything, the momentary absence of it only makes it more terrifying whenever it returns.

Chapter End Notes

i said this was gonna be under 10k and then i wrote THREE FUCKING THOUSAND WORDS OF SMUT IM SO SORRY IDK WHO I AM OR WHAT IM DOING AND OH NO

this week i have been having a fun time reaching the conclusion that i hate george AND dream because fuck them they're both stupid and they dont deserve happiness. slash half joking. let me know what u think about it!!! or dont! that's fine too!! either way please drop a kudos to make saint (me) smile

playlist should be in da main notes <3 if ur interested

head full of drought

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

George swears the world *knows*.

It knows, because it rains all night, and the bulb on the bedside lamp blows, and the shower runs cold as though the pipes are protesting Dream's departure. He bangs a fist against the wall at one point. Predictably, the water remains frigid, but he's just about masochistic enough to shove his head under it to get all the suds out.

Then he stands in the middle of the bathroom with a towel under his arms, creating a puddle around his feet as he stares into his reflection, dark eyes, dark hair, skin perfectly uninterrupted in every direction it stretches.

As the water runs over his collarbones, his shoulders, into the hollow of his throat, George is reminded of how Dream describes him when he's like this. When they're standing together in the shower, exchanging kisses soured by the taste of soap, or touches in places which make the sound of the water necessary to mask their every gasp, shutter, moan.

I always thought you looked like one of those statues when you cried, he says, with his thumbs in the divots of George's cheeks. They trace down, down, as though etching the ghost of something into his real flesh. *That's what I thought the first time, when you were sitting there with tears running over your face. It's twisted, I guess. I thought you looked like you were made of marble, with the cemetery rain covering your skin.*

"And now?" he asks, fingers skating through the fog gathered upon the glass. Outlining his features, committing the changes to memory.

Dream hums, and George is affronted with the skin covering his chest, sunspots adorning his shoulders, the cut of his throat with the red oval pressed into it. Something about wax burning, he says, how it looks when it turns translucent and escapes the flame. That's how George appears when he cries.

It's coming, he knows. Because hatred blazes hotter than fire ever can, and when it burns itself out he'll be left with nothing but the wax running over his cheeks, silent strings, the rain clamouring against the windows. The sea closing over his head. There's nothing for him in New York if he can't become concertmaster, nothing tethering him to this side of the Atlantic if Dream forgets how to love him violently enough for it to ache.

Still, he wears one of Dream's shirts today, uncaring when it hangs too wide on his shoulders, too much material gathered around his waist, the smell of the green bottle lingering upon the collar even if it's not on the dresser. He contains it in a sweater while his hair is still dripping onto the floorboards. The broken lamp stays dull in its corner. When he enters the music room to retrieve the strad, Dream's old violin stares at him from the other side of the room, the case covered in a patchwork of stickers which peel around the edges.

George hurries from the apartment after that, with the distinct sense of something ghostly following him down the stairs.

"Morning," is what his desk partner greets him with, the same as usual.

This time, his exhaustion doesn't feel quite so heavy in his chest. Dream's only been gone for one day and one night, so he can still smell him on the sheets when he sticks his nose into them, and his laundry remains stubbornly at the top of the basket. If he squints, he can pretend he hasn't really gone to Prague at all. If he squints, he can pretend the candles are lit when he returns home in the evening, because the smell of wax sticks in the air and there are white ellipses on the coffee table where they've been burning too long.

"Morning," he replies, with a smile that reaches the top half of his face.

"How was your week?"

"Better," he says, even though perhaps it reveals too much. "My partner was home this week, so it was...better."

"Was?"

"He's away again." His smile slips, and his thumb fits into the end of his bow, tracing over and over the mother of pearl. It's reminiscent of how he feels before exams or auditions, when his stomach twists itself into knots and pages and pages of over-rehearsed manuscript flood over his vision uninvited, so elevated is his drive to be perfect. Perfection is obtained by pain, by fear of being ordinary. "In Prague—I'm beginning to think he should move to Europe."

"Don't you ever want to travel with him?"

You can come with me if you want? You were talking about Paris this week, and...

"All the time," he supplies, loosening his bow as the unease spreads through his veins, crawling under his skin as though it wishes to claw its way out, no matter the cost. Be it his matter peeling from his bones. "But I have so much work to do, and.."

"That's right—you play a lot, don't you?"

He blinks, the weariness which accompanies close to a hundred hours a week tugging at his eyelids, his arms, his chest.

Sometimes, when he's played too much in a day, the world outside the fingerboard begins to appear as a dream, and George can't shake the strange sensation that he's in a state of reverie where words are dynamic markings and the lines tacked to the roads are staves. "I play enough," he says, glancing at the empty seat set at the forefront of the orchestra. Belonging to the wrong person.

"You'll play yourself to death," she says, with her eyes crinkling at the corners. It reminds him of Dream, in a way. Dream, who says those exact words, over and over and over. Dream, who pulls him into bed when his fingers are no longer able to keep up with the music, unaware that every minute he spends *not* rehearsing George's heart thrums with guilt.

And he knows Dream taught him how to play music in a way independent of perfectionism, in the language of love and hatred and obsession, but playing like a soloist isn't going to do George any favours.

Besides, Dream's playing has changed. George isn't sure what it means to play with blood filling his vision, with bruises covering his neck and red lines dividing his fingers, because Dream can't even demonstrate these days.

"You know, I've heard he's retiring soon," his desk partner says when she notices his vision trained on the concertmaster's seat. One of her eyebrows is propped up, and her gaze is obstructed

by a glass lens as though he's being observed. Then again, it's nothing he's not accustomed to.

"Really?" His heart squeezes, palms slick with the prospect of walking into an audition room once again. Hours of work beforehand, pages and pages of music beneath his fingers because the reward outweighs whatever he has to put himself through in order to obtain it. And he knows he'll be up against people far more experienced than he is, but maybe Dream was telling the truth when he called him a *prodigy*, maybe he's different.

She hums affirmative. "You should audition. You're right for it, I think."

A smile spreads over his face, the kind that accompanies internal warmth, gentle reassurances *he's enough*. Not quite like the dizzy elation he feels when Dream plays as though possessed by what they've done, not his heart pulsing hard enough to break free of his chest, not the corners of his lips stinging, not the galaxy held in his eyes.

But a smile, nonetheless.

"Yeah," he says, less measured than it should be, betraying his hopefulness. "Maybe I should."

As it usually does, the rehearsal runs with such fluidity George doesn't notice the sun tipping from its high point in the sky, or the clock ticking later, or how many pages he turns. Then it's back home, more playing, more sleeping in a bed too big for his body, more dreaming. When the concert arrives, he performs it in a blur, before the orchestra is moving on to new repertoire.

But even in the haze of his mind, he can pick out how he feels sitting on the stage, his worries about Dream diminished as the world narrows down to the flick of the baton. There's no room for it when he's performing. Only the pressed lines of his concert clothes, the smell of rosin sticking to his sleeves, the floor reverberating with music beneath his feet.

And the rain skittering from the roof of the car on the drive home, the crunch of windblown leaves as he re-enters the apartment building to dimmed lights and empty rooms.

So George's days pass like this. With the same routine, honed to be flawless.

The monotony is broken in the most unexpected way—with one of Dream's friends standing outside their apartment building on a Wednesday afternoon, a plastic bottle in one hand and an umbrella in the other. Although it remains folded, and the light rain darkens the top of his hoodie.

George watches him in curiosity as he progresses up the road, curious as to whether he'll climb the steps to the front door and jam his thumb into the buzzer.

Another step, and another. He stands with his arms lax by his side, the bottoms of his pants soaking the water from the street with every passing moment. There are orange leaves scattered around him, the veins sodden in a way which makes them appear as though they are wet sheathes of paper clinging to the concrete instead of blazing fire. And around them both, the smell of weather turning drifts.

"Can I help you?" George asks when he draws close enough, one hand extended in front of him to hold the umbrella over his head. Even though the rain is gentle enough to go without it, George prefers to keep his clothes dry rather than damp, because wet jeans are something for when Dream is home. Something they're supposed to do together. When they sprint to the apartment with their hands in one another's, laughing so hard it hurts. When they push past each other on the stairs, abandoning their clothes the second they cross the threshold and press their damp skin together on the couch, heaters churning to life.

Sapnap startles, head whipping towards him. “George.”

“Don’t sound so surprised,” he says, “you’re standing outside my apartment.”

“Well, I know that, but...” Sapnap rubs a hand over the back of his neck, eyes darting away from George’s face. “I was about to leave, to be honest.”

“Without knocking?” There’s a smile brimming onto his face now, amused by how much his gaze seems to make Sapnap squirm. He shuffles from foot to foot. His eyes dart between George and the front door.

“Listen. I’m in the city for a few days, right? And I figured I should probably see Dream’s sorry ass while I’m around, but I came here without really thinking about it, and...”

“And?”

“I don’t know. I realised he’s probably away again,” Sapnap sighs. His shoulders deflate.

George presses a hand over his chest, feigning offense. “He’s not here. But didn’t you want to see me? I thought we were friends.” They’ve only met a handful of times, and Sapnap still looks at him in the same manner he did when they were teenagers—like he’s afraid George will chew him into small pieces. Figuratively speaking, at least.

“Not really. You don’t exactly have the most welcoming aura.”

“That’s probably why you spent so many years telling Dream horrible things about me,” George supplies easily, stepping past Sapnap to ascend the stairs and jam the key into the door. It protests for a second, before the rust loses its grip, and the lock clicks. When the door swings open, he turns around once more, surveying Sapnap’s raintrodden form on the pavement as though he’s something unsightly. A coffee cup, perhaps, with its contents running into the road. “Come in,” he coaxes, propping the door open with one arm. His fingers splay across the hardwood, painted white by the overdrawn sky. “I doubt you’ve got much else to do.”

“You’re so charming, George.”

“Thank you,” he says, beaming. His umbrella folds its arms into itself, tucked up in a ball like a woodlouse fleeing the open air.

As George begins to climb the stairs, he swears he hears a muttered, *fuckers are perfect for each other*.

It’s been a while since someone else has been in this apartment. George can’t help but feel as though it’s wrong, as he leads Sapnap into the entryway and lines his shoes up next to the door, parallel to each other and perpendicular to the wall. Sapnap’s go unevenly next to them, and it’s much too familiar, so he lines those up, too. His coat rests on the hooks. They’re half empty. The two of them are observed by their reflections in the circular mirror, appearing as if it’s one lens from a pair of glasses, and an invisible eye watches them fumble around in the dimness.

George makes it to the pair of couches first. He sits at the end of the one in front of the window, because that’s where Dream usually sits, and he thinks he’d rather run his fingernails over the pavement than see someone else in his place. Sapnap is left to sit across from him, with the coffee table in the middle like a division.

Maybe it’s because he’s sitting in front of the window, but a chill spreads over George’s limbs, phantom rainwater dripping down his spine. It’s cold in the apartment—the heaters are quiet, and

draughts blow through the gaps in the floorboards. Autumn air claws its way through the open window. His cheeks are warm from walking so briskly, but he knows he'll begin to feel the cold before long, so he asks, "do you want tea?"

"Tea? That's so—"

"British, I know." George crosses to the kitchen and busies himself with it, allowing each repetitive motion to distract him from the uncommon occurrence of someone who isn't Dream sitting in their apartment. "I'll take that as a no."

"No, I want it."

"Please?"

There's a shuffle of fabric as Sapnap presumably presses his spine to the back of the couch. "You're just the same."

"The same?"

"Insufferable."

"And you are nothing in particular, but I haven't reminded you of it yet."

Sapnap is quiet after that.

Within five minutes, George is back in his—*Dream's* seat, a cup clutched between his hands and a crease between his eyebrows. There's a blanket over his shoulders, blue and threadbare. He thinks it came from the end of the bed in the studio apartment. And there's something comforting in that, something that warms him more than the yarn pooling across his thighs, because it reminds him of familiar love, of familiar hands in his own, of familiar music spilling across the bridge.

"I didn't talk shit about you to Dream, not really," Sapnap blurts, when the silence stretches out and begins to grow thorns. His expression is apologetic, his stature shifting every now and again.

George lifts an eyebrow. "You told him I paid to get into that competition. You told him I used my *dirty fucking money* and bribed my way in."

"Didn't you?"

He sighs, crossing one leg over the other and resting his hands atop his thigh. Just the same as his mother does. "No. I happen to be very good at violin. But you also told him I was spoilt, and I only cared about myself, and that *I* hated *him*." Each one is ticked off on his fingers, and Sapnap appears to grip his cup tighter as a contrast to the relaxed manner in which George leans back against the couch.

Then he realises the cushion has warped to fit the way Dream sits, so he avoids resting on it.

"I'm...sorry?"

George retains his composure for a moment until he has to stifle a laugh in the palm of his hand, shoulders shaking as Sapnap sits across from him with his gaze trained on the coffee table. "You realise I don't actually care, right? It was over a decade ago."

"I couldn't tell! You're sort of scary, especially when you're glaring at me like that."

"I'm scary?"

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

Sapnap exhales, and one of his hands reaches up to rake through his hair. The ends of it are still wet, so they drip onto the couch in order to create a ring of raindrops where he sits. “Probably because Dream is in love with you. I’ve never seen him look like that while he’s talking about someone *ever*, it’s kind of disgusting.”

“In love with me, hmm?” The pad of his ring finger traces the rim of the cup. Around and around and around, mimicking the shape of a breve.

“What, are you fighting or something?” Sapnap asks. When George continues to stare at the bottom of the cup, he frees a sharp exhale. “Seriously? Why— I mean, it’s not like you have to tell me why. I just thought you guys liked being mad at each other,” he says with a laugh that does nothing to unwind the tension strung between them.

George purses his lips, sets down his cup. Straight away, his palms chill. “It’s not like we’re fighting, exactly.” He rubs absently at his calf where his legs are crossed, allowing the hollowness of the apartment to settle between his bones. “It’s just difficult, with him being away so much...”

"Well, I guess there's something you could do about that."

"How so?"

“Your family is like, rich as fuck, right?”

The tea scalds the roof of his mouth when he sips at it. “Yes.”

“They must have a certain degree of...influence.”

“I suppose so,” he says, uncertain. Admittedly, Dream’s accusation that he became concertmaster of the Juilliard orchestra through disreputable means wasn’t exactly unfounded. Growing up, he learnt that morality wasn’t so important as discretion, and if he wanted something altered, the means usually wasn’t so far to find.

“Right. I’m guessing you could destroy Dream’s career if you wanted to.”

George stares at him with the sides of the cup burning his palms, heart sinking in his chest. In an instant, he’s standing in the practise room, venom tipped words overflowing his mind in order to conceal how he truly felt: *you can’t touch me*, he said, a lifetime ago, *you know you can’t*.

Because you have sway in this wretched world?

Dream’s voice is an addiction when it resounds in his mind like that, clear as day.

And with darkness sticking to every corner of the apartment, George can’t help but think the world really *is* wretched.

Then Sapnap laughs, shattering the silence. “I’m *joking*, oh my god. The look on your face is fucking priceless.”

“I would never do that,” he mutters. A part of him remains nauseous. The reflection of his face peers up at him, distorting at the edges as the tea swirls around the cup. “I love him.”

“So you’re not jealous.”

"Why would I be jealous?"

"Um, because he's like, one of the best violinists in the world?"

And George is here, stuck in rainy New York.

"I'm happy for him." The tea swills in the bottom of the cup, square sections of light caught in its surface as it creeps in through the window. Sarnap still stares at him, incredulous. "Really. I wouldn't want to be a soloist, even if I played like one. It's lonely, isn't it?"

"Right."

They sit for a while, unaccustomed to each other. When George exhales, Sarnap doesn't inhale like Dream would, because there is no dichotomy between them. And he's reminded that he is not made of marble. He is just a person—a wretched person with his wretched influence, battered by the tides of their wretched world as it takes Dream away from him again, again, again.

It's difficult to say whether Dream is condemned with the same humanity he is. For a moment, when he heard him warming the music room in the middle of the night, George swore Dream was something otherworldly. Humans have a tendency to conflate extraordinary ability with the supernatural, of course. He is just a person.

Dream is a light that blinds.

Sarnap's cup is empty by the time George speaks again. He waits until it's set down on the coffee table, its bottom fitting into a wax ring leftover from the last time Dream sat on this couch with his hands crossed over his stomach, eyes fixated on the ceiling. Thinking about something or other, no doubt. George knows better to disturb him when he's like that, for his gaze turns starry and his lips part as if his soul is about to come spilling out.

So he asks, against his better judgement. "Has Dream's playing ever changed before? Even if just for a week or so."

Sarnap seems to think about it for a while. Then he sits up. His eyebrows hold concern, and his eyes apprehension. "Now you mention it, yeah. There was that Christmas break, back in college. When you were ignoring him—he played fucking weird back then, I remember."

His eyes flutter closed in acceptance. "He's not playing the same now, either," George admits, barely more than a whisper. "It's a good thing, I think. But he always said I'm his muse and...and I can't help but feel like he doesn't need that so much anymore."

"Okay, no."

"No?"

"Haven't you considered that he fucking grew up? Isn't it a good thing he doesn't hate you?"

"I don't know if he feels much of *anything*."

"He wouldn't want to fucking propose to you if that were the case."

George's heart drops into his stomach. It sits there for a moment, stewing in the acid as he considers the weight of those particular words, words which send his mind off in a thousand different directions. Until his chest rises and falls faster and faster, nothing like the reassuring click-click of a metronome.

"He *what*?"

"Shit, I probably shouldn't have said that. But did you seriously not know? You've been together for years."

"I didn't know," he breathes. In another lifetime, it would drag him out of the ditch, set him down on the side of the road and dust his shoulders free of dirt, but in this one, George's insides squirm around with unease. Because Dream does things with conviction, with his heart and soul. And there's something stopping him, something preventing him from doing what he wants.

Something George doesn't know how to fix.

"Um, George?"

George looks up to find Sapnap leaning towards him over the coffee table, hand outstretched as if he's unsure whether he's allowed to touch. He's not. George draws in on himself, blanket winding tighter around his shoulders. It reeks of orange oil, of vetiver and the laundry detergent they share.

"I'm fine," he dismisses, schooling his features back into normality.

When he was a child, his violin teacher showed him where to put his fingers on the fingerboard—she stuck red lines under the strings, instructed him to press his fingers down precisely on each one. Then he grew older, and the lines came off. He still remembered where to put his fingers. It was second nature by then, as was clearing his face of unsightly emotion, shoving it into a heart-sized package and keeping it securely in his chest.

He smiles. "I was just surprised, that's all," is what he says, betraying nothing about how his throat sticks to itself.

They talk about nothing for a while longer. George doesn't focus on the words. Instead, he fixates on every perfect moment they've had over the last few months, every time they've held hands over a folding table, every time they've pressed their foreheads together and laughed into each kiss, every time they've sat up in bed at three in the morning, reluctant to close their eyes and lose sight of one another.

All those moments would've been right, wouldn't they? George isn't so sure what makes a moment special, but he knows there is colour in the sky and laughter in his throat whenever Dream is allowed to exist next to him.

He traces the rim of the cup with an empty finger.

"I've kept you much too long," he exclaims when he can't bear it any longer. There's only so long he can hold it before the seams burst, and there's nothing he wants to do more than run his eyes raw in the centre of his unmade bed. "What are you doing in New York, anyway?"

"Just visiting someone," Sapnap says with a shrug, "wasn't aware you cared."

And he doesn't, not really. But he smiles, because that's what he's supposed to do.

When the door shuts behind Sapnap, George stands with his forehead pressed into the wood for a time. He supposes it's cathartic, to feel sorry for himself every once in a while. This is why he finds himself back in Dream's seat with Dream's blanket wrapped around his shoulders, cheek resting on the back of the sofa as he watches the sky fade to black. From the music room, his violin taunts him.

For once, he ignores it. He doesn't think there's enough feeling left in his fingers to play for the minute. Numb from the cold, he justifies.

With evening comes a food delivery. It's the first time he's moved in an hour or two when he struggles to his feet to collect it, blanket falling in a heap where the indent of his body is pressed into the cushions. He chews so fast his tongue smarts. Then the dish goes in the sink, and the water he pours into it reflects the kitchen lights until they dim.

George plays the piano that night. Reverie, over and over again, the notes so familiar under his fingers that he ends up staring through the window rather than at the keys.

Eight million other lives continue, separated from him by a pane of glass.

When he thinks about it like that, it's disconcerting. There are so many lives crammed into the streets, so many people with existences just as wretched as his, and the distinctions between them don't mean anything. Not really. He's not Dream, he's not a prodigy, his heart isn't made of marble, and there's nothing to stop the cold stinging his limbs when he curls up in the middle of the bed.

Unperfectly, unperfectly ordinary.

The next concert passes as easily as every other. Afterwards, George climbs into a car with his wet shoes and the smell of leather pulling him inside, the top of his shirt buttoned tight against his throat despite how hot the stage lights become.

He sets his violin case down in the middle of the apartment. His clothes go straight in the washer, lonely. George showers while they're being tossed around and around, and there's too much space in the glass box, just as there's too much space in the drum. As always, he suspects some of the water running over his cheeks isn't from the showerhead, but the night hides, and so he emerges five minutes later with a dry face and pink skin.

Tonight, the music room calls.

Although his first instinct is to sit down in front of the piano, press his fingers over every one of the keys in greeting, he stands in the centre of the rug for a while. He breathes, attempting to pick out the smell of old tobacco from yellowing paper and varnish. Dream's violin from college is still in the corner.

And George decides he'll play it tonight.

His fingers flick through the shelves, deft and accustomed to the layout of it all. He was the one who sat on the floor for hours with manuscript surrounding him, shuffling it all into painstaking order as Dream stepped between each sheet. George remembers his tongue poked out when he did

it, brow furrowed so as not to disrupt his order. The rest of their things were still in boxes. Their bed was a mattress on the floor, but the music room was pieced together first, because it was as good as a beating heart.

He finds what he's looking for, of course. It's one of the Wieniawski Polonaises, so it resides close to the window on the far side of the room, moonlight dappling over the edges. When he pulls it free, the page whispers.

Running his fingers over Dream's music is a little like attempting to stare into the sun, gazing at the mind of a genius with eyes that can't adjust properly. There are circled notes and pencilled crescendos, accents dotted in places George would never think to stress and slurs stringing between the bars in wobbly arcs since Dream's hands jitter when he writes. He wonders if Dream would still play this the same. It's an old copy, after all. Perhaps he would play it more conventionally these days, with notes flowing over one another as he hones it to breathtaking perfection.

The thought of asking Dream to perform it sours George's tongue.

Instead, he turns towards the violin case tucked into the corner of the room, reaching for it with trembling fingers and an anticipation crowding his lungs. Something close to how he feels while he's waiting for Dream's hand to fall, for blood to rush to his skin, for a smarting pain to blossom across it. Bated breath, blown irises, tensed muscles.

He half expects dust to plume from the case when he opens it, for the violin to murmur when he removes the velvet. Neither is the case. The violin gazes up at him innocuously, nothing but several pieces of wood fitted together with the strings drawn loosely over the bridge since the pegs slipped months ago. Bow unwound.

Still, his hands burn as he lifts it, as he cradles it to his chest like a child, in this heart of a home.

It takes a while to make the pegs stick once again, and he scrubs at the bow absently so a white cloud affronts him when he runs his thumb across the hairs. The back of his throat dries. Then the body of the violin is pressing against his skin, fingers adjusting upon the neck to accommodate for the differences between it and his own. It's heavier in his hands, he notices. Heavier than his violin, heavier than the del Gesu Dream has with him somewhere in Prague.

This violin is used to dance over graves, to sing obituaries, to draw blood. Perhaps that's why George feels lighter as he's playing it. Perhaps that's why he feels possessed. This violin doesn't bring a need for perfection, and it doesn't demand he play every note perfectly, for it's spent its entire life being used as an instrument of chaos.

When he received the strad, it was all too clear what it meant.

He was standing across from his mother for once, and the planes of her face were oddly unfamiliar despite being so similar to his own. After all, he could gaze into a mirror whenever he wanted. His mother was a little more difficult, since her room was often deserted, and the hallway outside it rang with graveyard silence.

And there was a case on the table, the latches undone by her fingers. She should've gazed at him with warmth while he held her violin in his arms, one thumb tracing the curve of the body. Instead, she looked as though she were committing an act of philanthropy, one that could be revoked if needed.

He was sixteen. It was old enough. His chin remained level, his mouth remained flat except to smile, his hands remained steady as he cradled the violin, and his shoulders remained lax despite

the tension strung around the room.

“This was my mother’s,” she said, a tight smile drawn across her lips. They were always the same—painted dark red with the lines so crisp it appeared as though her face had been slashed at the bottom. She looked the same for the entirety of George’s life, because he rarely saw her without makeup, and it was always perfect. “And her mother’s before that. You understand what that means, don’t you?”

He nodded, the violin weighing as much as the sky in his hands. “It means I need to look after it very well.”

“Exactly.” She didn’t say it, but George knew he’d have to do a little more than take care of the violin if he wanted to make this worthwhile. He’d have to play it perfectly, without a single note misplaced. He’d have to play so well he could be at the top of his field, since it was the only thing he was good enough for. Third children were forgotten otherwise. If he played beautifully enough, he’d capture her attention for a moment.

“I have a competition next week,” he said to breach the silence. “Are you coming?”

She didn’t cut him off, even though they both knew the answer.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and for a moment, George really believed it. It wasn’t as though she didn’t love him—if that were the case, she wouldn’t have been standing there with an apologetic expression, several million being passed into George’s possession. He felt selfish for wanting more, because he had the world.

His chin dipped in understanding.

Through it all, his sister watched with her arms folded over her chest and a frown resting atop her lips. She wasn’t so much older than him—but she glared at the floor like a child, and when she wasn’t glaring at the floor, she was glaring at George’s hands holding the violin. Strange, since she usually smiled. But on the day George was given the strad, she appeared as though the world had wronged her, and refused to speak to him unless necessary.

She saw him looking at her, and her eyes softened. Her arms uncrossed themselves. Her lips became flat once more, a picture of nonchalance.

“That violin should’ve been mine,” she hissed through her door much, much later, when George stood outside it with his fist smarting from the wood. Just as there are flowers which only bloom at night, there are some truths which require red rimmed eyes and an exhausted mind to be released. These truths weren’t flowers. These truths were spat like apple seeds, poison flicked from the tip of the tongue as Eve seethed behind her door.

“But I love violin,” he said, and it sounded like a lie.

The door flew open then. She was standing there in a robe, the cord untied around her waist. They were similar height despite how narrow George’s stature was, so her eyes burnt straight into his. “You think I don’t?”

“But...”

“Say it.” She stepped backwards, and a shadow fell across her face to give her the appearance of attending a masquerade. While the night reveals, it also hides. “Say I’m no good at it. Say *you* were the one who had to be born a prodigy, even if it makes you cry yourself to sleep when you can’t win a single one of the competitions you go to.”

His jaw ticked. "How can I be a prodigy if I lose?"

If he lost to people like the boy with a devil's violin and eyes jaded with the world.

"Because you don't love it, George."

You don't play with love.

That was for Dream, Dream and his eyes brimming with anger. With a love violent enough to tear the notes to pieces, rewrite them with his soul.

You play with an innate fear of failure. Nothing else.

The violin goes back in its case before he reaches the *fine*, and the case goes back in the darkest corner of the music room so it can relive its glory days.

George returns the thought of her to the darkest corner of his mind.

There are countless symphonies which go missing between the centuries, innumerable pieces forgotten as soon as they're written, unable to stand the test of time. No matter how promising, not every composition is a masterpiece. Perhaps it drawls, or the notes are impossible to execute, or the beginning burns so fiercely that the end of it dies on the floor, a bird felled from the skies with broken wings.

George tries to think of anything else when Dream steps back over the threshold, but he can't help but feel as though this is their third movement, the stagnant lull which settles over the hall before the fourth arrives. Perhaps they'll leave before that can happen. Perhaps they'll spit at each other under their breath and walk right out of the auditorium, killing the symphony of their own volition as the sound fades, and fades.

This time, there won't be an apartment in the middle of the river to return to. Dream has lost his taste for blood.

"Why are you awake?" is the first thing Dream says to him. George's phone remains quiet, placed on the counter in front of his folded hands.

"I couldn't sleep."

He doesn't want to be reminded of the Seine.

"It's the middle of the night." Dream leaves his violin in the entryway and crosses to the island, heat pressing against George's back when he threads his arms around his waist. So, so, gently. George bites back a scream.

“How was Prague?” he says instead.

“As beautiful as ever.”

“And the performances?”

Dream smiles against the apex of his skull. “I think you know the answer to that.”

George grits his teeth. He knows. But he wants more than anything for the truth to be different, for Dream to crave bloodshed in the form of murmured disapproval as he once did. He wants Dream to be furious at the world for kissing at his feet, but instead he welcomes it with his arms outstretched as though he is a prophecy, inevitable. And George watches, from somewhere in his ivory tower.

But it is not a tower, and it is not made of ivory, because their apartment is stuck on the second floor of a grey little building in a grey corner of the country, and it resembles a prison more than anything.

Now Dream’s lips press to the spot beneath his ear, and even the smell of him is unfamiliar.

“Aren’t you tired?” he asks, twisting out of his grip.

Dream holds on for a moment, before his hands drop to his sides, empty.

“Exhausted.”

“So sleep.”

He’s greeted with a hum as Dream pulls a wine bottle from the top shelf and a knife from the drawer, slamming it with his hip once the handle is balanced between two of his fingers. George watches with his cheek propped on an open palm. The knife is directed to the cork, which comes free after Dream runs the blade around the edges. When he presses the rim to his lips, moonlight slides over the glass, ripples over his fingers as red stains his tongue.

“You’re not supposed to open it like that,” George says.

Dream tosses the foil. The bottle goes with him to his seat in front of the window. “Have I ever cared about doing things right?” For once, he doesn’t turn the lamp on, so he’s left to sit with the darkness dripping from his silhouette.

“I suppose not.”

Like a fool, George follows.

He ends up sitting next to Dream, one knee hitched up on his thigh and his elbow resting on the back of the sofa as their words are lost to the humming city. It’s louder today, as though they’re sitting in the middle of it, rather than behind a glass pane. One glance at the window confirms it’s propped open. Maybe it should make him feel better, that the entire world isn’t riding on this conversation about Prague, and rehearsals, and concerts, and the electricity bill, but it doesn’t. George, as he often does, feels utterly lost.

The bottle ends up in his hands more than half the time, and it dwindles before long. Their lips are painted red with it. Each time Dream passes it to him, the glass is warm in his hands, a reminder of how Dream exudes heat when he’s lying next to him in bed, how he staves off the chill of the shower, how he turns all the lights on when he’s home because he knows George is afraid of the dark.

They kiss, and kiss, and kiss, and George decides the dark is nothing compared to this.

“It’s four in the morning,” Dream whispers after a time. His lips are swollen. He watches the wine left in the bottom of the bottle swirl as he flexes his fingers, entranced by the gentle sound of it lapping at the glass.

“Sleep,” George says again.

“I don’t want to.”

“Why?”

“I’ll lose you, then.”

George watches him drain the rest of the wine, watches as the last of it escapes his lips and runs down his chin as though he’s bleeding. Around them, music flows, although he doesn’t remember turning it on. His limbs feel as though they are made of marble, weighted. It’s difficult to move. So he sits perfectly still, watching from the top of the world as Dream’s thumb presses over the base of his ring finger, the nail painted dark to resemble a black diamond.

“Why do you do that?”

As though he doesn’t know.

Dream stills. “I like your hands.”

“Yeah?” he prompts.

Dream remains quiet. Then he lifts George’s hand with his own, bends his neck to press a kiss to the back of it. His lips are warm against his knuckles. The room is still other than that—Dream doesn’t surrender one knee to the floor, doesn’t hold both of George’s hands in his own and beg him to stay awake forever.

And then Dream’s cheeks appear wet in the distant sunrise.

His shoulders shake, salt tips towards his jaw, he clutches George’s hand with both of his, loose enough so he’s not hurt, tight enough that he knows Dream is holding him as though it’s the last time he’ll ever be able to. Dream holds him like a precipice, the void opening up beneath him as the height slicks his palms.

“Why are you crying?” George asks, slipping his thumbs along the creases beneath Dream’s eyes. The pads come away wet, the whorls of his being filled with tears.

“Don’t talk about it tomorrow,” Dream says, although George doesn’t think he’ll remember much of this either. Not with the hour eating away at his mind, with his eyes closing for longer and longer every time he blinks. “But I think you’re going to leave me. I really think you are.”

“Hey,” he breathes, heart rate much too slow for the way the room fills with water. “What—”

“You look at me like you already did.”

George can’t find the words in his mouth before Dream is blinking up at him, lips stained bloody and eyes reflecting the stars as though he’s falling in love for the thousandth time. “What can I do? What can I do to make you *stay*?”

He isn’t so sure anymore.

So he pulls Dream's head against his chest, cradles it to his heart. Allows him to curl his fingers against the beating of flesh and blood, gripping so hard George wonders for the first time in years whether he'll reach between his bones and take it for himself. Then Dream's hand slips to his. He holds as tight as he can with his fingers, but they are not made of platinum.

They kiss as a lacklustre third movement begins, lips slow against one another, heavy with wine. It's reminiscent of the first time Dream made love to him, but red wine curdles his throat instead of filling his stomach with champagne bubbles. Their tongues are sour, the kiss overripe. Dream pushes into him with wetness collecting at his temples, illuminated by the pale light of the streetlamps. And he pushes back, arcing his back from the couch as he unravels.

And since George plays with a fear of failure, he wishes they'd left their symphony perfectly incomplete.

They forget, but they don't heal.

The gap between them while they sleep grows wider, and they don't wake up at the same time. George leaves the apartment before Dream can blink his eyes open, pulling a coat tight around his body and his violin case over his shoulders to disappear for a few hours. By the time he returns, Dream is sitting in the living room, reading glasses sliding down his nose. He'll fold them, look up at George, and smile.

George smiles back. Neither of them say a word.

As it turns out, the catalyst is exactly what he expected it to be.

It happens on an afternoon like any other, but this time he's shut himself in the music room because the afternoons are becoming colder and finding somewhere else to practise saps the life from him. The notes stay flat on the page, miniature pupils gazing up at him each time he plays one wrong, or moves his fingers too lethargically, or draws his bow too fast. For once, it's not raining. George doesn't command the world with his violin. He is just a person.

The hours slip away, and his playing doesn't improve. No matter how much he dissects the pages, how much he reruns each section, there's something that isn't working. His throat begins to close. He's not twenty anymore, he can't surrender to simple retribution, he can't leave the room and allow Dream to fix everything for him, he can't turn broken notes into red marks.

For every unsatisfactory run, George becomes more infuriated with the music. Until he's sitting in the middle of the floor, hands knotted in his hair as he stares through the window, mounting panic hammering against his ribcage. All he wants is to *succeed*, but he's never going to become concertmaster if he spends his time breathing in through his nose, out through his mouth, a hand settled over his chest as though to pull it in, out, in, out.

He doesn't register the door opening until Dream is sitting behind him, arms winding around his waist just as they did nights ago, in front of the kitchen counter. The similarity isn't blissful.

"Take a break," he's saying, words murmured into the dark strands of George's hair.

“How did you know?” he asks. His voice comes out much too small.

Dream pauses, and his lips withdraw for a moment as though he’s confused. “You screamed,” he says, pulling George closer so he can feel the rise and fall of his chest. He’ll miss this, he thinks. The way Dream holds him with both hands, lips pressed to his nape as the music is pulled from the stand by a stray draught. It cascades over the floor, and the rug ends up covered in pencilled sheets of manuscript.

“Shit,” he murmurs, pulling out of Dream’s grasp to stack them in order. The pages shiver in his hands.

“Leave it, okay?” Dream takes the music from him when he’s done, and sets it down on top of the piano.

George’s nails bite at his palms, because Dream spends all his time playing the same pieces, taking them out of the box over and over again, uncaring even when they lose their jagged edges. Dream has his flights paid for, his hotels paid for, his fucking violin paid for, all because he was born with something other than ordinary blood pulsing through his veins. “You don’t get it,” he murmurs, flexing his fingers to shake the aches free.

“Hmm?”

“You don’t get it. No matter how many times I play it, it’ll never be fucking *good enough*. It’ll never be as good as you play it. Why? How is that fair?”

“I love the things I play,” Dream mutters, pulling him from the music room and towards their unmade bed. “I’m a soloist. I’m supposed to love them more than life.”

Dream leaves to play music in concert halls on the other side of the world, Dream leaves to play music free of the darkness he’d tried so desperately to cultivate when he was younger. Dream leaves George, again and again. And when he performs, there is none of his muse left between the lines. It’s true that Dream is supposed to love the music more than life, but when he’s spent so long proclaiming *George* as his life, the realisation smarts like a hand colliding with the side of his face.

“You showed me how to love music. You taught me that to love is to break, to begin anew.”

When Dream speaks, he’s looking into George’s eyes, spring and autumn, just as they’ve always been. “I was right, wasn’t I?”

“You tell me.”

“I feel as though I’m breaking.”

They shed their clothes like a routine, hands moving reflexively until they’re exposed to the evening. They’ve done it so many times. Dream knows George better than anyone in the entire world, Dream knows where to press to make him gasp, Dream knows how to hold him to slow his panic, Dream knows that something awful is coming because George is sinking his teeth into his bottom lip, pulling him in like oxygen.

Something about being known like that is terrifying.

The cum on his stomach doesn’t feel so good this time, he thinks as he slides his fingers through it. Dream wrinkles his nose, because it’s disgusting. But he doesn’t say anything. The atmosphere isn’t quite usual, not even as they lean back in again, and again, and again, breathing as though it’s their very last day on earth and they need to make the most of how air feels filling their lungs. Of

how their tongues taste, soured by the ghost of red wine.

With the last one, he pulls away.

Dream waits. He knows George better than everyone else combined. He knows.

“I break you?” is what he asks.

“You do.”

“You don’t break me.”

“I don’t want to.”

George is quiet. He breathes with his lungs, *his his his* despite who broke him apart to put him back together. His heart beats, once, twice, a testament to how wretched and alive he is.

“I think we need to end this,” he says, unnerved by how measured his own voice sounds. Even as his heart falls out of his chest, he knows how to clear his face. “It’s not...it’s not a good thing anymore.”

Dream is looking at him as though the world is ending.

Perhaps not in a destructive way—he does not scream, or cry, or grasp George’s wrists in shocked denial. He accepts it like death, like he knew all along it would come.

Still, he leans forward to take George’s jaw in his palms, to press his lips to his forehead. Their skin is damp, as it so often is when they’ve stayed out too long in the rain together, hands in each other’s pockets as they tilt their heads back to gather raindrops on their tongues. “It’s late,” he says. It’s always late. “You’re tired.”

George is always tired.

“What are you saying?” They’re pressed together in so many places, nakedness ill fitting of the conversation.

“I’m asking you to sleep on it. Sleep on it, and if you still feel like that in the morning, tell me so.”

“Do you think it’ll change anything?” After months of this, after years of being left all alone, after cumulative days spent pacing around the cramped interior of their apartment.

Dream’s smile is damp at the edges.

“I don’t know. I can only hope it will.”

Chapter End Notes

peace signs

lover, you still burn me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There is perspiration sticking to the ends of George's hair and red dusting the tops of his cheeks when he declares, "I've thought about it."

It's early in the morning, but not so early that the sun hasn't begun to rise. So the room is doused in the strange sort of blue light it adopts when it's particularly bright, the furniture oversharpened and oversaturated. When it's golden hour, George finds the world swims around as though drunk. But since it's morning, and the cold air kisses his skin, he feels naked as he says it.

I've thought about it.

Dream freezes where he stands at the end of the bed. His shoulders tense, his back straightens. He drops the blanket he's holding, a folded blue square landing on the edge of the mattress, precariously close to the tipping point. Delicate balance, so easily ruined with one stray push. "That doesn't sound good."

"Why?" George steps into the room.

"Because it's not an *I was wrong*," Dream says, dragging a hand through his hair. "It's an *I've thought about it*."

"Do you think I was wrong?"

Dream pauses at that. He does not turn yet. Instead, he looks down at their vacated bed, at the mess of pillows laden with indentations crowded at the headboard, at the place they're supposed to sleep with their arms around each other. The place they sleep with an inch of air between their skin. "I woke up, and you weren't there. You're never there."

So now Dream knows how it feels.

"I wake up earlier than you," is what he says.

When he woke up, it was so early his eyelids stuck themselves together. He lay in the darkness for ten minutes, trying and failing to crack them open. He wasn't sure what made it harder—the perpetual weariness plaguing his ageing body these days, or the knowledge that he'd see Dream lying next to him once he opened his eyes, hair thrown over the pillow and his mouth parted. Maybe there'd be a crease lining his forehead this time. Maybe George would have to decide whether or not to pull him from a nightmare.

Eventually, he managed it. George didn't look at the other side of the bed.

He found himself outside in the early hours of the morning, reminiscent of the way he'd traveled to Juilliard before the sun came up every single day, once upon a time. It wasn't quite that early this time. Warmth pooled at the end of each street, pockets of light falling between the buildings to brighten his face every now and again. The sun should've told him to turn around, go home and climb back into bed, reposition Dream's arms around himself, wait for those green eyes of his to blink open. It should've told him to persist, because despite the long nights, there is always dawn at the end.

George didn't go home. He stepped on all the cracks in the pavement and prayed to god the monster living between them would eat him whole.

Then he bought hazelnut coffee, because that's the one Dream gets at this time of year. The cloying sweetness of it made him gag. It was too much, all at once, and it only got worse as he approached the bottom, so half of it ended up in a bin somewhere. Even so, the sugar stuck to the back of his tongue in a similar way that cigarette smoke does, only this was so much worse because this time Dream wasn't the one kissing him hard enough all he could taste was tobacco.

When the sun began to make his eyes burn, George returned home.

He noticed the apartment was freezing when he got in, but perhaps it was because his skin was so hot from walking in the sun. The lights were off. For a moment, he wondered if Dream already left, but then he entered their bedroom once again and found him standing at the end of the bed as though someone had died in it.

He cleared his throat, and prepared for the end of all things.

"I wake up earlier than you," is what he says.

Dream turns to face him now. The space beneath his eyes is swollen, and it appears the colour of bruises. It must've been worsening over the last few days. George hasn't been able to tear himself away from his manuscript for long enough to notice—he only sees Dream in the evening, when the night hides, and hides, and hides.

In the light of morning, there is no escaping.

"I know you do," Dream is saying now, hands wringing together. "It makes me wish I held you tighter the morning I left for Prague, even if it would've woken you. It makes me wish I did fucking *something* that morning, because it was the last time I'd ever be able to."

"You know I'm breaking up with you," George realises. He says the words so they'll register, dull and heavy. Dream knows he's breaking up with him, and he's standing at the end of the bed with his pyjamas half on, half off, a shadow dusting his jaw. He doesn't fight, he doesn't beg for George to *stay*.

He stands there, defeated.

"I do."

"Why aren't you *doing anything* about it? Why aren't you asking me to stay? Why won't you ask me to marry you?" His voice breaks with the last one, and he balances at the edge of the land as the cliff face crumbles into the sea.

"Because you're miserable, and you won't let me help you." Dream turns away from him now, reaches for the case abandoned in the middle of the floor. It's only half unpacked from when he'd last come home. And he kneels in front of it, pulling his clothes from the end of the bed without hesitation, as if he's been expecting this moment for months and months.

"I would—"

"You don't tell me anything, George. You keep it all in your head, and it's poisoning you."

George is used to being poisonous. So it's with a familiarity that he steps forward, lips downturned as though they're in a rehearsal hall at nine in the morning, Dream's headphones

slung around his neck and his jacket falling off one shoulder. And he says, “you wouldn’t be anything without me. You wouldn’t have learnt to play so violently without me, you wouldn’t have got past fucking square one without me.”

The bite of poison tastes frightful upon his tongue.

He’s expecting Dream to whip around with his teeth gritted. He’s expecting Dream to push him against the wall and hiss in his ear—perhaps *just as you would be nothing without me, concertmaster*. He’s expecting them to end up in the middle of the bed together, with Dream’s palms blissfully stern against soft skin and his teeth marking crescents all the way up George’s neck, because he must’ve gone too far this time, must’ve crossed the line they’ve been keeping to one side of for the last five years. He’s expecting to wake up covered in his lover’s favourite colour.

Instead, Dream’s chin dips towards his chest, and he folds the stretched Bleach shirt he’s holding in those long fingers of his. When it’s a neat square, he speaks.

“I’m sorry you feel like that,” is what he says.

George’s marble heart crumbles.

In a way, it feels awfully like sitting in the middle of someone else’s bed in a draughty apartment, a violin in his shaking hands and his skin exposed in red and cream swathes. It feels awfully like being instructed to *play* despite the tremors in his fingers and the tears in his eyes, it feels awfully like obliging even though the notes come out dark and twisted. It feels like playing more and more, guided by the voice. It feels like realising he’s giving too much of himself to someone who’s surely had enough of him now.

George can’t bear to watch, so he does exactly what he’d done all those years ago.

He flees.

And he feels too small for his body when he finds himself sitting beneath the piano, knees tucked up to his chest as he grips the leg with one arm. But in an outpouring of so much emotion, he isn’t sure what else he can do.

When he was a child, he was instructed to sit under the table should there ever be an earthquake. And as the world tears in two, he supposes this isn’t much different.

He doesn’t register his hand on his chest until Dream enters the room, bare feet quiet against the rug, and he doesn’t register the way his lungs pull in and out, in and out. This time, he hopes he won’t scream. There’s nothing more embarrassing than to be discovered like this.

Despite his best efforts, Dream sits in front of him, with one knee pressing against the floor and the other against his chest.

Despite his best efforts, Dream knows where to find him, like a compass pointing *home*.

“I came to get my violin,” he explains, although he doesn’t move towards where it rests on the other side of the room, the case resting across the arms of the chair they got reupholstered at some point in the last three years. He remains, eyes boring into George’s.

“Where will you go?” George asks, once he trusts himself to speak.

“There’s nothing tying me to New York,” Dream says. His hand scratches over his jaw, and the

ring settled at the base of his pointer finger flashes. The black paint coating his nails is beginning to chip away now, as though he's fracturing into pieces. "I'll go home, I guess."

Cruel of him to say, since this is the first home George has ever known.

"I packed as slowly as I could," he says when George remains silent. It resounds like a confession. "Just in case you would change your mind. But most of the things in this apartment are yours, so," he breaks off with a smile, fingers drawing mindless patterns over the rug. For a moment, George imagines he likes it. "I was bound to finish at some point."

"If I asked, would you stay?"

"I don't know. I would want to, more than anything. But I don't think that makes it right."

"Don't you always do what you want?"

Except just one thing, George's mind nags.

Dream takes George's hand one more time. He doesn't comment on how it twitches. "But you just seem so *angry* with me these days," he says, dropping George's fingers as a shadow clouds his face. "I thought if I said something it would all be over sooner, and I wasn't ready to lose you, because you're the biggest part of myself, and that's terrifying. But you seem intent upon making me hate you, in some masochistic way. Like you can't allow yourself to fucking be happy."

Now he stands, warmth withdrawing from George as he grasps the violin case with one hand and turns towards the door. From this angle, his features are cast into the dark.

"I wasn't lying," he says. "When I said you break me. You broke my heart."

When Dream walked out of the practise room, he left George kneeling on the floor with the stars dotting his cheeks rather than freckles. Red adorning one side of his face, more beneath his clothes. He did not look back as he left their underworld of hedonism, for they were not in love. The door slammed behind him, and the nature of their relationship was thrown into uncertainty, for although they'd been enemies before, with the taste of Dream's release on his tongue, things were undeniably different.

This time, the door does not slam when Dream leaves, violin on his back.

Instead, it rests ajar. Just enough so that a draught can spill through and force him to curl his chin to his chest, shivering as the winter begins to set in.

But there's one more thing. The thing George doesn't think he wants to remember.

Because as Dream is leaving, he looks back,

one last time.

Actually, it doesn't take George so long to adjust to this as he thought.

It's not strange to him that the bed's empty, or that he watches his clothes spinning in the machine by themselves, or that the lights aren't on when he comes home, because he's used to that already. Dream is away more often than not, and if he closes his eyes and focuses on the way the wind pushes against the sides of the building, he can imagine he'll come back, sooner or later.

But he doesn't want that.

He ended it for a reason—because Dream makes him want to pull his hair out at the roots, cram his fingers into his mouth and scream, sob until he's shaking and there's blood running down his cheeks. Dream is a reminder of all things he'll never be. It hurts less, now there's only himself to stare at in the mirror when he's brushing his teeth. Now, he doesn't fear waking up in the middle of the night to the sound of music through the wall.

The first time George stops feeling as though he's safely tucked under the piano is when he's sitting outside, with his hands cupped around his tea as though it'll stave off the chill of mid-Autumn. It's just begun to bite. He's wearing a coat now—he'd thought to do that ever since Dream gave him his jacket weeks ago, because the way it smelt was unfamiliar, and there was nothing more horrid than unfamiliarity in the face of the person he loved most.

So he's sitting outside of this cafe again, and there are no cherry blossoms because it's Autumn, and there's no coffee on the other side of the table. No hands holding his own, no thumbs pointing to the spot an engagement ring should go.

Next to him, someone exhales cigarette smoke. It drifts across to him, grey like news pages lost in the breeze.

George gets to his feet at once. He draws his coat tighter around himself, leaves half the tea on the table, and turns at street corners without hesitating because he comes here with Dream all the time. When he's home, at least. Now he's thinking about it, George doesn't particularly remember making the conscious decision to come here in the first place—rather, he'd done it as a matter of habit, ordered the same thing as usual, and sat in the chair he always does. Except this time, there was nobody to talk to, or inform him they're *leaving soon*, because this time, it's already happened.

His back hits the door of the apartment as soon as it's shut. He remains there for a while until his chest slows and he's no longer clawing for air, out of breath from climbing the stairs.

"I should really move somewhere with a fucking lift," he mutters to himself, shedding layers onto the hooks by the door. There's a hoodie much too big for him deserted there, so he throws it in the laundry to get the smell of him out.

He should play violin, but he sets himself down on the sofa in front of the window. He should email about the shower refusing to stay hot, but instead he rests his feet on the coffee table, rather than tucking his legs close to his body like usual. Because this is his apartment now, and he doesn't see why he should squeeze himself down to a size smaller than he is.

When he sleeps, he ensures to spread all of his limbs out across the mattress, revelling in the feeling of so much space, the quiet of his lungs the only thing moving, the coolness of the sheets only warmed by his freezing limbs.

Or he revels in the distraction of it all.

Speaking of distractions, George finds himself more bloodthirsty than ever when he's playing violin, because in order to succeed, he needs to be the best, no matter how many people he has to step over. He's not concerned with appearing beautiful to the artists of the world, and he's not

concerned with playing so hauntingly broken that some prodigy or another is bound to come picking up the pieces. In its place, there is only perfection. There is only the passing of hours in the music room, marked by the rising and setting of the sun, the tick-tick-tick of the metronome.

George would rather sit at the front of the orchestra than have poetry written about him, but he can't help but wonder whether Dream is writing poetry about someone else, now. Whether he's finding other violinists to fuck, other concertmasters to fuck, just like he used to. Because even if he were to place a ring of light over his head, and recite love sonnets, and draw a bow across a string in the shape of a sonata, the devil is still the devil.

George's hands slam down onto the piano keys, twelve of them at once. The note dies eventually, but his shoulders heave, and nausea roils in his gut.

He takes his hands away.

In front of him, five pages of music taped together at the edges is splayed, with the notes jumping from sheet to sheet as the folds rise. He doesn't remember making the conscious decision to sit down at the piano, not really. Much less the decision to pull this music onto the stand, and begin to play it in order to pass the time. In fact, George doesn't particularly remember how he got here from his spot on the sofa a few days ago, the time he rushed home from the cafe, or how he managed to forget something as simple as the passing of the days.

And he realises it's not so difficult to stop counting them now that he doesn't have anything to wait for. He hasn't opened his calendar in weeks, because as long as he remembers all his rehearsals, there's not much else he needs to think about.

It's almost midnight. Witching hour, they'd call it, when they would play the most eerie pieces they could think of and make love on the rug afterwards.

George sets his chin in his palm, and avoids looking at his violin, where it sits in its case.

But it doesn't pain him to rest his elbows on the keys, slowly, slowly, until they're pressed all the way down. It doesn't pain him to rest his foot on the pedal, or to lean forward until his brow connects with the ebony. It doesn't. Dream wasn't the one who taught him to love piano.

He remembers running through the house at the age of six, when his feet were the clearest thing to him as he ran along the corridor, tears streaming down his face. The rest of the interior became all muddled in his mind as the months passed afterwards, but he'd always remember the confusion which made him cry in the first place.

"Eve," he sobbed when he reached the music room.

The sound of the piano fell flat, and she turned towards him, flicking her dark hair over her shoulder so it would no longer obscure her vision. Her lips fell into a frown, and her hair fell to the middle of her back in waves. "What's wrong?" she asked, uncertain. As though she was unsure whether she ought to be telling him off for crying like this.

"I can't do it," he said, like he was expecting her to read his mind.

"You can't do *what*?"

George went to stand next to her then, gazing at the piano and wishing she would play it again. The house didn't seem so oppressively empty when she did. "Third position," he said after a moment. "Can't do it."

Then she laughed, and went back to pressing the keys. The way she did it was so different to how she played violin, with the tip of her tongue stuck out and a crease between her eyebrows. She pressed the piano keys like there was all the time in the world to be finding the right ones, moving her hands up and down until everything sounded right. "I can't do it either," she said, playing another chord wrong. Then she righted it, one moment later. "And I'm older than you."

George sniffled to himself, haunted by the image of his violin tutor watching him put his fingers down in the wrong places, lips twisted into a frown. So instead, he watched Eve play piano. Not once did she take her hands from the keys, set her feet on the floor and announce she was going to learn to play in third, fourth, fifth position. She allowed her violin to rot away in the corner, safe from her line of vision until she was inevitably made to play it in the morning.

He thought of Mother, how her lips did not appear so severe when she was playing violin. She stood in front of the window in the study, morning light falling across her fingers, her bridge, and played the violin as though she were in another world. A kinder world, where music was the language everyone spoke. And when George played it well enough, when he wobbled his way through a sheet of manuscript, the look on her face suggested he'd spoken her language, if even for a moment. He suspected she loved violin more than him. Rather than resent it, he took it into his arms in the hope she would look at him like that more—like a son.

But here was Eve, with her fingers gliding over the keys.

"Why do you love piano more than violin?" he asked.

"Don't you find violin so horrible to play? You set your finger down in slightly the wrong place, and oh! The note's wrong."

"Mother said I just have to practise more if that happens. Until I get it right."

"But with piano," she hurried, as though he'd said nothing at all, "the notes are all there for you. Sure, sometimes you press the wrong ones, but...it sounds alright that way. I don't think it has to be perfect."

George stood there with his lips twisted into a frown. "It doesn't have to be perfect?" *Practise makes perfect*, he thought of Mother saying, repeated over and over as though she was practising the words themselves.

"No. Mum can't play piano anyway. How would she know?"

"Can I learn?"

"You want me to teach you?"

George nodded.

"Come up here then," she said, shifting to one side so he could sit beside her.

With that, he approached the piano, one foot in front of the other until he was staring straight at the keys. In those days, he was so small the top of his head wasn't level with the top of the instrument. When he climbed onto the stool next to Eve, his feet remained suspended in midair, unable to reach the pedals.

She laughed like it didn't matter.

"You'll reach them soon enough," she assured, nothing like the sharp voice of his violin tutor

when he couldn't stretch his fourth finger far enough. It collapsed more often than not, weak against the string. George soon came to learn that things like that really, really mattered in his violin lessons, because if he wanted to make Mother smile while he played, he had to do it perfectly. But Eve didn't care that he couldn't reach the pedals. She also didn't care that his hands were too small to reach much more than a fifth, so he didn't care either.

Then her gaze fell back to the piano, and with it went his attention.

"This one is Middle C," she said, hair obscuring her face as she leant forwards to press the key. She checked to see he got it before continuing. "Then D, E, F, G, A, B—" her thumb moved up a step with each note, before stopping just shy of the octave. "And this?"

"C again."

Her hands fell back into her lap, open. "C again," she confirmed, tucking one side of her hair behind her ear so she could beam at George. "That's not so difficult, is it?"

And it wasn't, compared to the one two three four one two three of a violin scale. He put his fingers on each key, pressing in succession until he reached the fifth.

Before he could ask, Eve was leaning forward again, extending a hand. "You should put your thumb underneath when you reach F," she said, demonstrating quickly. "So you don't run out of fingers."

George did that too, albeit slower than Eve did. Then when he came back down, he repeated the motion the other way around, so his third finger crossed back over his thumb. "Like that?" he asked, encouraged by how the piano didn't screech at him despite his unfamiliarity with it.

She sat back, pressing the heels of her palms to the stool and blowing out a breath so the strand of hair in front of her face blew upwards for a moment. "Yeah, like that. You did that much faster than me—you'll catch up soon."

He smiled down at his hands. "Probably," he said, because he wasn't particularly concerned with being polite just then. "Can you teach me until then?"

"Okay," she said after a minute's consideration. Their smallest fingers looped together, a promise. "But you can't tell anyone. Especially not mum."

"Why?"

The overhead light illuminated her face when she smiled. "Because it's more fun that way."

Years later, when George became much, much better than her at both violin and piano, he was struck by the acute feeling that he was breaking an oath. He took the violin because he proved he deserved it, and while Mother's lips turned up into a smile, Eve glared down at the floor in the corner of the room. Although she'd attended all of his competitions while they were teenagers, she stopped turning up after that. As though she couldn't stomach the sight of him.

So when he asked Mother if she was coming to the competition, he was really asking Eve.

The answer came a week later, in the form of an empty chair.

When George left for Juilliard, he learnt to love the violin, too. Perhaps not in the same way he loved piano, because they were opposite sides of a coin, similar in nature, but different in what they really represented. He was hesitant to touch a piano for a time. It felt a little too much like

opening a tomb. Much less play it to Dream, who'd surely be unamused by the story of George, and Eve, and apples which fall too close to the tree.

As George's violin rests somewhere behind him, he's determined not to allow the same thing to happen again.

Because Dream might've taught him a little about how to be moved by the music, but Dream didn't take hold of his arms and make him play that cadenza, no matter how many times he apologised for it. It was George moving the bow, and George playing the notes, and George trembling in the chill even as heat spread across his skin.

And if Dream can find a thousand other things to inspire him, George can too.

It lasts a day, or a week, or a month, George isn't sure, before the silence unnerves him.

Dream plays music all the time, if he's not practicing. He listens to it in the shower, in the evenings, at breakfast, before he falls asleep, the same few hundred songs over and over and over, enough times that George knows all the words too. Without it, the apartment feels like a fucking anechoic chamber. Or a dark room, with all the lights switched off. George turns all the photo frames over because burning the pictures feels like something people younger than him do, with their eyes blazing and rebellion fluttering from their shoulder blades.

Instead, he feels wearier than ever. Perhaps it's something about the cold freezing his joints.

He knows that's a thing—he knows people sometimes become sadder in the winter, even if the promise of Christmas is enough to pull them along until the year turns over. George can't help but wonder if he's one of those people this year, as he sits with his frown directed at the greyness of the sky. It's difficult to tell. He's spent his whole life believing perfection is strength.

So because the silence presses so uncomfortably against his ears, George sits on the couch in front of the window, where the cushion is bent to a spine longer than his own. The match fizzes for a second when he lights it. He's so entranced by the way the flame dances atop the candle that he ends up singeing his thumb, and melted wax gathers in his eyes as a pain reflex.

And he pulls up Dream's playlist, the one he's still got saved to his phone. It sits in some dark corner of its memory, hundreds of songs with the power to conjure *him* out of thin air should he just press play.

He does it now.

Because at some point during his childhood, he learnt the best way to stop being afraid of the dark was to stand in the middle of the room with all the lights off, bare toes flexing against the floor in terror and a hand clamped over his mouth. It was to walk through the corridors at night, to look each one of his fucking ancestors in the eye, throw his head back, and laugh. It was to play the devil's triad in the music room even though it was three in the morning, then tuck his violin under

his arm and wait for the furniture to grow claws.

It never did, because the things in the dark aren't real. And Dream felt so, so real when he was here, but now he's not, and George wants to stop whispering his name as though it'll summon the devil should he say it any louder.

Sweet thing, I watch you

Burn so fast it scares me

A bead of wax escapes the rim of the candle. It trails down, becoming less and less pearlescent until it falls to a stop. But there's more, and more, summoned faster and faster in a similar manner to how tears come all at once when the cork's pulled out with a knife from the cutlery drawer. Burns so fast it's terrifying, an obsession so all-consuming George couldn't have known what to do with himself when it eventually ran out of fuel.

And he's left with the wax streaming over his cheeks, flame burnt out.

His head moves to the cushion now. His fingers trail across the fabric. There are red lines sliced into each of the pads on his left, and it nearly makes a soaking wet laugh bubble from his chest because Dream hates fate, yet the marks his violin leaves on him look awfully like taut red thread.

Consciously, he tries to stop thinking about Dream. At some point, he'll be able to look at Sarasate compositions and listen to shoegaze without thinking about sun coloured palms and freckles dotting the tops of shoulders and fraying patches stitched to denim and coffee with hazelnut syrup in the bottom. How it tastes passed onto his tongue. But even then, he'll see lilies in the front window of a florists' and exhale, exhale, exhale, when he *doesn't* think of Dream.

Then inhale, because to realise he's forgotten, he must first remember.

It matters where you are

The song repeats when it's finished, like it's alive and breathing.

George can feel the water closing over his head, and he tries to swim to the surface, he really does, because he doesn't want to see heaven right now. Not because he thinks this is hell, but because he doesn't quite believe in either. There is only earth, and its perpetual orbit, and the song looping even though he doesn't remember pressing repeat...

Only a fool would deny himself heaven, he thinks when he ends up in Paris once again. It's the last halfway lucid thought he has, and now he's several years younger. His smile lines fade. His eyes brighten, in love with the world, in love with—

Dream.

Dream is next to him in the middle of Saint-Chappelle, which is a little out of the ordinary to say the least.

"...the performance was sublime, of course," George hears himself whisper, although the syllables are difficult to unpick. His lips are pressed close to Dream's neck.

"Of course it was. Not-just-anyone receives a special invitation to perform here, you know. Only those who aren't afraid to tear the ceiling down."

"Oh, I know." George pulls his head back, admires the way both of them are painted blue by the

stained windows. City light pours in, but it's not enough to brighten their faces. His stomach should twist, clench, upend itself with the dark as phosphores wrap around them. But here is Dream—"you're sort of like a celebrity now."

"I guess so."

"What's wrong?" George raises a hand to Dream's cheek. His heart thrums all the while, since he's certain they're not supposed to be in here when the audience has long withdrawn and they've only the dull luminance of Paris passing through the windows to accompany them.

"I guess I don't know if I like it yet."

He exhales, awfully amused. Awfully endeared. "You don't know if you like it yet? Dream, you're invited to play in the most beautiful places in the world—" his arm extends towards the star-spotted ceiling—"and they look at you as though you're the best thing in the room. They're right, of course."

"That's true." Dream steps towards him. Their hands join, palm to palm as naturally as the fingers fall into a bow-hold. "Except for just one thing."

"What?"

"Think I might be the second best thing in the room." His words are murmured over George's lips, so close he can taste the tobacco on Dream's tongue.

The stars blink into his field of vision as he rolls his eyes. "You're the prodigy, *mon cœur*. I'm just—just—" he breaks off as he struggles for the words. He's second best, he's the youngest child, he isn't fated to play the violin like Dream.

"You're *just* my muse," Dream says. "You're *just* the person I love even more than music."

"You don't love anything more than music," George says, with a breathless laugh.

"You're not just anything." Dream leans closer, so George can feel his lips quirking against the shell of his ear. "As the composers would say—my heart opens to your voice."

"You're horrid." George turns away to hide the ridiculous smile pulling at his lips.

"I'm just telling the truth."

"What voice?"

"Hmm?"

George turns back towards him now, skin dripping blue as though his jugular is bleeding out. Except, of course, George's blood is red like everyone else's. Just as wretched, too. "*My heart opens to your voice*. What voice? I can never play as you do. You must know that."

"I don't know about that." Dream is on the stage, fingers trailing over the lid of the grand piano leftover from the concert. It's eerie, in a way. How silent the vaulted ceilings can fall despite this instrument of sound sitting right beneath them like a mine. Those fingers look unfamiliar pressing the keys, slow enough the strings don't bite. Teasing, teasing, never going as far as to give in.

And because something about it makes a tension knot in the recesses of his stomach, George allows his voice to resound. "Are you going to play?" he asks, fully aware Dream finds no joy in

playing piano. He has to focus so much on how the two halves interact, he says, it gives him less breathing room to tear and rip and do whatever the hell he pleases like he can when he's playing violin. Too much of a soloist, he jokes. For someone like George, the orchestrated balance of it is comforting, in a way.

"Don't be stupid."

"What? You know how."

"Yeah, just like I know how all the pieces move on a chess board, but you beat me every single time. It doesn't mean I know how to *play chess*."

"Then why are you standing next to it like that?" George says, lifting an eyebrow.

"Because," he says, stepping forwards to pull George closer. He guides him onto the seat, and his fingers onto the keys, hands molding his wrists to be perfect, artist and muse. Then he steps back, admiring George as if he is truly cleaved from marble. "I think you should play it."

He thinks about how loud the piano will be, when the sound is allowed to run uninterrupted to the star-ceiling. Maybe they really could tear the whole thing down, be crushed beneath the sky. "Are we even supposed to be in here?"

"Do you think I care?" Dream leans against the piano, one palm supporting his chin as he grins at George. From outside, the light falls through glass and glances across his teeth.

"You're shameless." George's fingers fall into a chord, as soft as possible. Still, the resonance of it makes his shoulders rise higher.

Dream laughs. "I stopped being scared of the world after I realised you were just a person. A person who wants so badly to be better at violin he would resort to s--"

"What should I even play?" George interjects, ears glowing.

Dream's eyes burn green atop his blue skin when he says, "something beautiful, of course."

"Most music is beautiful, in some way or another."

"Okay. Play something people outside this chapel will hear in the backs of their minds and believe the world is ending, if even for a moment."

His neck stretches when he tips his head back to laugh. He imagines his throat moves with it, unable to contain the sheer enormity of his piety. Of his willingness to listen to Dream, no matter how much he drifts away from reality at times like this, when instead of air to breathe there is only music. "You have such an interesting way of describing music. I don't think anyone else would talk about it like that."

"You know what I mean, don't you?"

"I think I do."

George's hands set on the keys.

Something which makes him believe the world is ending. Heard through a stained glass window, never directly. It would have to be something familiar, he thinks, something he'd hear as his life replays in front of his eyes in the final few minutes before death. Something he's played before,

with Dream standing over the piano and the light falling over his face, a happiness blossoming in his chest.

He plays Libestraum, because he thinks it's something even the most soured of Parisians would hear through blue stained glass and smile at, believing at last eternal sleep will claim them. Except it is just him, sitting at a piano, pressing the keys. It's what George loves most about music—how the perception of something so carnal can affect the heart, make it beat faster and faster in its cage of bone, seize the stomach and turn it inside out, make the eyes fall shut as a person realises the magnitude of the universe.

More importantly, it's the first piano piece Dream ever heard him play.

After all, it's easier to tie music to feelings he already knows.

So as he plays, he isn't thinking about tearing handfuls of stars from the sky, or the end of the world, or fate placing them in the arms of each other. He only thinks about sitting by the piano in a stretched Nirvana shirt and his boxers, pink lovebites littered all over his neck and matching petals bursting to life on the trees as spring sets in. Something about it makes the ceiling seem so much closer. Less imposing.

The dream slips around a little. Such as the brain struggles to recreate the words printed into books, it struggles to recreate music, with all its intricacies. George only sees Dream watching him, the artist inspired by the human. There is an awful expression on his face. Awful, because he is looking into George's soul, and seeing it ensnared with half of his own.

And it's a terrifying thing.

When Dream leaves George shaking under the piano many, many moons later, he climbs onto the stool and plays Liebestraum, because to his narrow existence, the world is ending.

The song is still playing in the apartment, but night is rapidly approaching. George blinks his eyes open to see orange pressing in squares against his vision, the sky divided up into equal sections by the window frame.

He sits, disorientated.

George can't remember the last time he fell asleep during the day. There's so much to do—endless pages of repertoire to be rehearsed, cold showers to stand beneath, photo frames to turn over, freckles kissing the tops of shoulders to forget. His feet make indents in the sofa cushion, and the blanket pulled over his hips falls as he brings his knees to his chest. Draughts blow around uninhibited, passing through open doorways and gaps in the sealant melding the windows to the walls.

If he wanted, George could move somewhere different. He could look at the skyline every morning as he used to, standing at the top of the world. There would be no draughts, the water

wouldn't run cold, and he would have a thermostat that switches itself on at five in the morning so the floor isn't freezing beneath his bare toes when he gets out of bed.

But the thought of packing everything into boxes stops him.

Fitting his belongings into cardboard, uncapping the pen between his teeth and writing down its contents on the outside. Surely he'll find shirts too big for his body if he searches the bottom of the wardrobe. He'll find manuscript adorned by handwriting messier than his own, half empty bottles of green cologne forgotten in the drawers, earring backs lost to the gap between the dresser and the wall, spice jars Dream's mom gave them as a housewarming gift crammed on top of the microwave.

In his periphery, he sees the piano sitting alone in the music room, the keys silent without a soul to inspire them. Is it the end of the world yet? he imagines it asks. Has it come already?

He considers playing it, but it's evening already. There's a hollowness to his bones.

George unlocks his phone, navigating through the call log and the contacts until he finds the one he's after. Meanwhile, the piano sits, silent. His thumb hovers over the green icon.

Instead, he gets to his feet, grimacing when his knees sting.

He ends up in the kitchen. He sits at the island, similar to how he was the night Dream came home from Prague. His phone rests facing upwards, with the contact page still open. If he fell asleep here, with his cheek pressing to his crossed forearms, George has no doubt he'd imagine Dream in the depths of sleep, pulling him from the kitchen and back onto the couch so they could share a bottle of wine. He'd imagine Dream stepping over the threshold, smile as wide as it was when the last note was left ringing out in Sainte-Chappelle.

But for now, it's just him and the kitchen.

The kitchen wasn't such a familiar place to George when they first moved here. All his life, he didn't find himself wandering into kitchens so often, because they had people to cook for them, people to buy the food, people to ensure the floors were swept and mopped. So it ended up detached to him. He didn't know where everything was in the cupboards. He didn't even know what he'd find within them if he looked.

When he moved into this apartment, he remembers Dream laughed at him whenever he bent over the counters.

You're really clueless, aren't you? he said, looping his arms around George's waist to cut everything quicker. Then his lips pressed to the centre of his head, and the redness spreading over George's neck didn't seem so unbearable. *Did nobody ever teach you how to cook?*

Of course they did, he insisted. *At school.*

Which was what, a decade ago? The knife scraped along the cutting board, and the pan sizzled. Dream's hands folded themselves across his stomach once he was done. *I can't remember anything from school. Think I was too preoccupied with violin.*

At that point, George grew impatient with the way Dream's voice made his back vibrate where it connected with his chest, and so turned right around to pull him in by the jaw and attach their lips. The kitchen was warm, and bright, and he was wearing Dream's thickest socks because his toes would grow cold otherwise.

George thinks those socks are probably gone by now.

On the microwave, the spice jars stare at him.

In an attempt to affix his gaze somewhere which won't remind him of Dream, George allows his eyes to drift back down to the counter, where his phone rests. It's only marginally better. The contact sits innocently enough in the centre of his screen, three letters spelling out E-v-e. But he squints, and it looks a little more like e-n-d.

George lifts the phone to his ear in a hurry.

Then there's the dial tone, droning on and on as he waits for the line to connect. With the turning of every second, George considers hanging up, leaving his bridges burnt, starting all over again with people who love him.

Even then, that wasn't enough, was it?

"George?" Eve says when she picks up. There's nothing amicable about it. She says *George*, but what she really means to ask is why he's bothered phoning at all, why he's suddenly decided to remember he has a family again after so many years of making excuses to avoid returning home. What she means to ask is why he's reminding her of his existence on an evening in late Autumn.

"Eve, hi."

Then he falls silent, waiting.

"Why are you calling?" she asks eventually, and although her voice remains steady, George knows her well enough to hear the exasperation behind it. He imagines she's frowning with lips painted the same gentle red as Mother.

"Because I fucked up," he says honestly. Not *I haven't called in a while*, or *I just wanted to hear your voice*, because he suspects Eve would hang up if he did. Like this, she'll stay a while longer, sick satisfaction holding the phone to her ear as George bemoans his life in rainy New York.

She's quiet for a moment. Then, "it's midnight, George."

"I know, I'm- I'm sorry. I was just thinking about how we were best friends when we were kids, and I guess I miss it."

Now she laughs, with serrated edges that dig into his skin. "We're siblings. Not friends."

"You know, most people would allow themselves to be both."

"You still took that violin. It was supposed to be mine."

"It was fucking years ago," he breathes, pressing the glass closer to the side of his head. Something about holding the phone in his hand makes it feel realer, as though Eve is really standing there with him, her voice resounding somewhere to the side of the island. "Are you really still jealous? Like a child?"

"Of course I'm still jealous," she says hurriedly, but even the admission feels like progress.

"You're allowed to do whatever you want. You're allowed to go to music school and do something you love every day and live on the other side of the world without talking to any of us. You're allowed to be a normal fucking person. And you have the nerve to call me when you *fucked up*?"

His throat sticks to itself.

“I don’t know who else I’d call,” he murmurs. Now he climbs to his feet, floorboards creaking beneath his weight as he paces from the kitchen to the living room.

Eve shifts again, as if she heard him get up. George expects she’ll say it’s not her problem, that he should’ve thought about this before he ended up all alone in an apartment made for two people. But instead, “did something happen with Dream?”

Hearing his name aloud makes George’s heart splinter.

“We broke up,” he says, and Eve must hear him choke back a sob because her voice softens, losing its sharp edges honed by years of growing apart.

“But you were so in love,” she says, equal parts disbelief and indifference, as though she can’t decide which to settle on. “Everyone could see it. I was jealous of you for that, too.”

“Well, I guess there’s no need to be jealous of me anymore.” He laughs to himself, drawing to a halt beside the window. “He’s gone. Even my job isn’t all you think it is. Isn’t that embarrassing? I’m supposed to be fucking good at it—it’s what I wanted, after all. But it’s killing me, piece by piece, and at the end of the day I’m just the third child who was allowed whatever idle fantasy he wanted because my share of the estate is infinitesimal compared to yours.”

“But the point is you’re allowed to do whatever you want, George. And you fucked it up, and that’s your fault.”

“It is my fault,” he admits. He stands beside the music room now, hovering by the threshold. Inside, the piano rests with the lid up. “It’s my fault, and I just want to know how to fix it. *Please.*”

She’s quiet now, quiet for so long George begins to wait for the call to end. But she speaks again, considering. “Tell me what you did.” Her voice is clipped, as though she would reach through the screen and strangle him if she could. He wouldn’t put it past her, if she thought she could walk away with Mother’s violin afterwards.

“Alright.”

George doesn’t shy away from telling Eve everything, even the parts she doesn’t particularly want to hear, because he thinks it’s important in the leadup to...whatever this is. With him standing outside the music room and all the lights off. He tells her how Dream hurt him all those years ago, he tells her how it freed him from being the youngest child of a family with dirty fucking money, despite how earnestly they pretended it wasn’t. He tells her how loved it made him feel. He tells her how it all fell to pieces.

He finishes in the present, with the night creeping into the apartment and goosebumps spreading over his shoulders, broken radiators and leaking faucets. He hopes it makes her smile, that he’s chosen to live like this, that even though Dream is gone, he can’t bring himself to move on. He hopes it makes her understand.

There’s a shuffling from the other side of the line, as though Eve is shifting around to fix her gaze through the window. When she speaks, George becomes aware he’s looking at the sky, too. “What flows through your veins, George?”

“I’m sorry?”

“You heard me. What flows through your veins?”

“Blood,” he says, although his brows knit together. They’re both at the age where gentle creases begin to creep up next to their eyes, and yet it reminds him of sitting on a piano stool, feet unable to touch the ground. Eve asking him to point to Middle C.

“Blood, not music.” She sounds angrier now, voice rising and rising. “Music is performed centuries after it is written and loved all the same. But you are made of flesh and bone and blood and marrow, identical to everyone else. There’s nothing fated or special or beautiful about you, because you are just another pair of wretched people in love, and love requires hard fucking work sometimes. Love can’t be read from a manuscript. If you can’t accept that, then you don’t deserve to have it.”

George enters the music room.

His fingers trail over the piano, pressing the keys slow so they won’t disturb the silence. He keeps the phone by his ear, gripping it tightly as he sits on the rug, as he pushes himself backwards so his knees are tucked to his chest once more and the leg of the piano supports his back. Because the ground might as well be shaking, splintering into pieces.

Just as George finds it easier to perform with emotions he already knows, he connects his emotions with the singular thing more familiar to him than life itself. He’s torn open his heart and connected all the arteries to music, to the black ink swirling across the page, and it’s eating him inside out.

“George?”

“I don’t know if he’d ever take me back,” he says, one palm pressing into the rug Dream says he hates enough to burn. “When he left—I hurt him so awfully.”

“I don’t know if he should, either. But I think you should try.”

“Why?”

“Because you can. Because if you didn’t truly believe in serving yourself, you would have walked out of that room with a different violin in your hands.”

“But I didn’t.”

“But you didn’t. You’re just like the rest of us, George, whether you like it or not. We’re siblings, after all.”

George tips his head backwards. In doing so, his gaze slips over the stacked shelves, over the round mirror hung on the wall, over the pyramid metronome sitting beneath it. And it lands on the violin case in the darkest corner, tucked away where the sun can’t reach. The lid is covered with stickers from countries Dream visited when he was still a teen prodigy, and the corners of most of them are either faded or scraped away. It sits there, unneeded, unmissed. But it’s important, George is sure. It’s the violin Dream played when he fell in love with him, the violin towed between practise rooms and rehearsal halls in the early mornings, deads of nights.

“Shit,” he murmurs. “I have to...do something.”

The faint sound of Eve’s questioning is cut off as he hangs up.

Then he’s scrolling once more, past the names and names and names of people he prefers to forget. Until Dream’s is underneath his thumb again.

This is exactly what he was so afraid to do when Dream was travelling the world, for fear he’d be

wasting his time, or he'd be so busy the line would refuse to connect. But he thinks of phoning Eve for the first time in years, and the prospect of it doesn't seem so terrifying anymore, because she's right. He wouldn't have been frightened to do this ten years ago, when he wanted to wrap his strings around Dream's neck and pull until his face turned blue, so he shouldn't be frightened now.

For the first time, he calls Dream.

In the time he waits, he stares at the sky, and imagines Dream is looking at it too. He imagines Dream is holding the phone in one hand, violin tucked under his arm with whatever he was playing cut short. He imagines Dream is deliberating whether to answer, before eventually sighing, and raising his hand, and saying—

“George.” Dream does not spit his name as though it scalds his tongue. Instead, he says in the same way he would recall the name of a stranger. Somehow, it hurts more to be ignored than torn apart.

Hearing Eve say his name might've made George's legs tremor beneath him, but it's nothing compared to how Dream sounds saying *his*. The earth shakes, he curls further into himself beneath his makeshift shelter.

“You left your violin here,” he rushes, before Dream can say anything else, like ask him how he is. He wouldn't know what to say—the thought of telling Dream about the rain and the empty side of the bed and the freezing shower makes his heart feel altogether too heavy in his chest. Then again, it always has. “I played it, before you left. I put it in the corner, the one the light doesn't hit. I guess because you couldn't see it, you must've forgotten about it.”

“Oh.”

“Don't you want it?” he asks, and he might as well be pressing his knees into the floor because it sounds as though he's begging. A phantom ache presses to one half of his face.

“It's not like I use it.”

“But it's important.”

Dream laughs then, although there is no humour to it. “I'm glad you think so. But it sounds as though it's more important to you than it is to me,” he says. Over the line, George can hear someone muttering in the background, and his heart twists as he thinks of famous violinists, of concertmasters and prodigies. “Don't you want to keep it?”

“I couldn't.” Not because he'd take guilt in doing so, but because there is nothing worse than erecting a gravestone in the core of the apartment. Turning the hearth into a tomb. Just as Eve said, he is identical to the rest of them. “It's yours.”

“If it's in the way, you can just say that.”

“It's not—”

“No, it's alright. It's been gathering dust for years.” A pause, while Dream inhales, exhales, quiet, but audible enough for George to feel as though his head rests upon his chest. “You can give it back to me. I'll figure out what to do with it.”

“Give it to you?” George's voice comes out more strained than before. “I can just send it back, Dream—” he ignores the way his tongue sticks to his name— “it's not difficult. You're still with your parents, right?”

Please say yes. George wouldn't know how to feel if he found out Dream moved into a new place.

"Yeah, but...the concert is next month. The Tchaikovsky one? Just bring it with you."

The concert.

Somewhere in the midst of Autumn, George has failed to notice the days running into one another, and the weeks following the days, and the months following the weeks. He's failed to notice the sun setting at four in the afternoon, so preoccupied with distracting himself from Dream. And somewhere in his preoccupation, *the concert* had slipped his mind, later's problem. It doesn't quite feel real. He begs himself to wake up in his empty bed, in a world where Dream isn't performing in New York just before Christmas, in a world where he won't have to look at his face and pretend it doesn't kill him.

But the world isn't ending, and he stays staunchly under the piano without blue stained glass to paint everything heavenly.

"Okay," he says after a moment. "I'll give it to you then."

"Alright."

By itself, the word sounds half complete. George is used to Dream adding three words to the end of conversations, wearing them out again, again, again. Much like the pieces he performs month after month, they never grow old. But now he's saying *alright*, and Dream doesn't say *I love you*, and it hits him like a palm to the face that this is deeply, deeply wrong.

In an attempt to convey all of this, George simply says, "alright," and ends the call.

Around him, the world contorts, and he remains curled up on the floor for fear of being crushed under the sky.

And in his narrow, wretched existence, everything ends all over again.

Chapter End Notes

song: when the sun hits - slowdive

MHMNHMHMHM I FUCKING LOVE SLOWDIVE IM SORRY IM A HEATHEN I HAD TO GET THIS SONG IN IM SORRYYYYYYYY !!!! idk what george was playing on da piano before he had his fun sister flashback but just assume it was something awfully sad and awfully tragic wah wah his life as a rich person is so fucking hard :(if ur feeling sorry for george just remembers he wears animal products and masturbates to sarasate

mar don't look

it's ok dream hahahaaa ur so sexy dream give the ring to me dream

thank u mar for assuring me this chapter isnt shit i dont remember writing it but im suitably caffeinated to be posting this rn i no longer care that i dont remember writing any of it wowewoeowwww ok have a good day everyone !! <3

adored

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The concert comes around sooner than he would've liked.

Time stands still for no one, not even people with coffers full of gold and ivory towers to elevate them from the ground. Time passes no matter the circumstance, rushing forward like a river around the bends, untameable by things as delicate as George's two hands outstretched in an attempt to stop it. And so instead of attempting to change the coursing of fate, he forgets.

He screws it into a ball, shoves it to the back of his mind. And then he sets it alight, just for good measure. He tells himself the smoke is the reason his sinuses sting and his eyes water every night when darkness falls.

There are too many other things to busy himself with first, and so George designates *tomorrow* as the day he'll worry over seeing Dream's face again, hearing Dream's violin again, but whenever tomorrow arrives, he pushes it back further still. In the meantime, there are rehearsals and concerts, nights bleeding into mornings, mornings bleeding into nights. And it's easier to shoulder the knowledge, that way.

But it hits him like a slap to the face when the concert is next month, then next week, then in three days.

"Fuck," he seethes to himself, one hand knotted in his hair and the other holding his phone in front of his face. His eyes are watering again. And again, he tells himself it's the knee-jerk reaction to being slapped in the face. In the middle of his calendar, *Concert with Dream* sits innocuous enough, put there by a version of himself who didn't flinch at those five letters lined up next to each other.

Tomorrow.

The concert is tomorrow.

George's palms slick as if he's already standing in the building, one broken half of his soul crying out to be pieced back together. Even though he's the one who took it in his hand and squeezed in the first place. Curious, how the masochists of the world splinter themselves into pieces, fracturing and breaking and tearing and clawing until the edges are too complex to fit back into one whole. Until his hands are so bloody he can do nothing but wallow in the red.

And like a coward, George wishes for Dream to break him more, so he might forget the pain of breaking himself apart in the first place.

The concert is tomorrow, and as another version of himself prepares to inherit a violin, George prepares to take whatever he can between his teeth, swallow it down so the sour taste of selfishness can settle in his stomach.

Tomorrow comes with the opening of his eyes. Time stands still for no one.

Out of bed, into the shower, into clothes that no longer smell of vetiver, into the back of a car with a driver who doesn't speak to him unless he initiates. George never initiates. Today is no different, even as the blaring of traffic around them fails to fill the silence in full, and the blue of the sky stretches out in blistering swathes. George pulls his coat tighter around him despite the warmth within the backseat.

In doing so, he notices the cologne sticking to the collar. It's faint, as if he's brushed past a stranger wearing it and failed to realise until much, much later, when he's looking for something out of place. George pulls it closer to his face. He keeps this last piece of Dream tight to his chest, because surely it'll make it easier to stomach the sight of him in his entirety when the car stops by the sidewalk, and the concert venue looms in front of him, and Dream stands at the front of the orchestra with his scars scabbed over. And instead of one violin case next to him, there are two—one spotless, one covered in stickers, one loved, one nothing but a relic of the past.

He isn't quite sure which is which.

George leaves the car without a word. It assimilates with the traffic once more, lost to the humming of a million people moving like a sleepy grey river. But he doesn't watch it depart.

Once, he would squint at the water to see the rocks sinking towards the bottom, exhaling in wonder as they fell to create the appearance of coppers lining the riverbed. One day, he stopped caring. He had more than enough coppers than he knew what to do with.

He walks the rest of the street, matching his steps to the pounding sense of dread in his chest.

The sky is clear for now, and the temperature dips below freezing. Even the thought of playing violin is unpleasant when it's this cold, hands shoved deep into his pockets as the air bites at his wrists. His lip splits in the middle, brittle skin cracked in two by the cold. Blood bubbles in the gap. George licks over where the cut lies, wincing a little when the contact stings.

Then his surroundings blur as they so often do when there's nothing important to remember them by, much like the memory of running through the house towards the sound of the piano. Instead of his sister at the end of the confusion, there is the violinist he sits next to asking him about his evening with an awkward twist to her lips, as though she's not sure whether or not she's overstepping.

There is the screw at the end of his bow, tightening between his fingers until the wood protests.

There is music spread across the stand, resting now on page one.

There is the stage creaking below him, and there is an empty auditorium staring George in the face whenever he casts his gaze across the tiers and tiers of seats.

At last, there is Dream, walking into the hall with his hands shoved into his jacket, shoulders trembling because it's far too cold outside for it, but he'd never listen to George's fretting. Then he removes one to run it through his hair, and it falls back in front of his face in a way less windblown than before. His eyes aren't visible, because they're trained on the floor. His shoulders draw in on themselves. Dream has never appeared small in front of a concert hall before, but with the hatred leached right out of his blood, the spite out of his stance, he appears a little more breakable under the weight of the vaulted ceiling.

George, for all his preparation, can hardly look.

"I can't imagine this is pleasant for you," comes the voice from beside him.

He turns to meet her eyes, his brown to the greying blue of hers. And really, he wants to tell the violinist to *fuck off*, because people of her generation will laugh like it's nothing, blame the splintering of souls on *young love*, like it doesn't make a person feel enough to carry them through the rest of their years as they shorten, and quicken, and grey. When George is closer to her age, he thinks he'd like to remember a little tragedy other than the loss of his time, lest he go insane.

Then George supposes he's not so young anymore. "How did you—"

"Know? It wasn't difficult to notice," she murmurs, eyes darting up to ensure they're not being overheard. "You stopped talking about him a while ago, and now you're looking anywhere but the front of the stage as though the rostrum has wronged you."

Something about being *seen* makes George's blood warm for the first time in a while. He swipes his tongue across his lower lip, and his mouth tastes metallic. "I don't want to hear him play. Isn't that ridiculous?"

She shrugs. "Because it's just music?"

"Something like that."

"But it's never *just* music, is it? I don't think any of us would be sitting here if it was."

"It's my job."

"It's difficult, I know." She uncrosses her legs, and one foot moves beneath the chair as the other remains flat against the stage. "To do something every day and still be as enamoured with it as a blind man seeing the clouds for the first time. Sometimes I think my ears must be eroding, with all that sound. But soloists never quite lose it, do they?" Then her eyes flit up towards Dream, who has a smile stretched over the bottom half of his face. "That's why the rest of us are so fascinated by them—because they make us understand."

George thinks of how Dream looks when he sets his violin down at the end of the day, excitement sparking in his eyes despite the repetitive nature of it. He thinks of how he pulls George closer in bed, murmurs about the notes into his hair. He thinks of how he never, ever, grows tired of it in quite the same way George grew tired of him.

"I don't know how he does that," he admits.

"It's a language, I suppose. When words end and something else *must* take over, because the magnitude of it is too great to be left unsaid."

George, unnerved, neglects to answer.

He lifts his violin under his chin when the baton raises, bow poised over the string. It's uncanny, because it feels exactly like the beginning of all other rehearsals, except this one is everything out of the ordinary.

They play. He doesn't concentrate on how Dream sounds.

Rather, he plays with the orchestra, satisfied as all the moving parts of it come together seamlessly. He doesn't need to follow Dream, because there's a desk in front of him to do that, and a conductor standing in his line of sight to keep them in stride with each other. For once, he finds himself relieved he's not concertmaster. He'd be too close if he were. Dream would become inescapable,

all-encompassing, necessary for each other's existence.

So despite himself, George feels nothing but relief.

After a while, they stop, and they're muttering between themselves as they discuss something or other.

Whenever Dream speaks, George angles his face towards the stage and refuses to listen, like a child standing in the corner of the room, glaring at the floor as someone else takes what's his. They shouldn't be listening to Dream's voice, he thinks. Not when it haunts him as he sleeps, crawling into the cavity of his head to resound as though his skull is a cathedral ceiling dressed in stars. And here they are, listening to his voice with their violins tucked beneath their arms and their hearts compounding, expanding at a steady pace.

His own stutters so fast the stars of Sainte-Chappelle look a little too real for a fleeting moment.

Just music, he thinks.

What runs through your veins, George?

Blood, not music.

George sucks a breath through his teeth, lifts his bow to his string, feels the thrum of his pulse in his wrists. Blood, not music. Odd, how he finds comfort in the assertion he is nothing more than a person. Perhaps most would find normality a cage, an iron band around the ribs, but to George, with a ring on his smallest finger and nobody waiting for him on the other side of a phone line, it is nothing but freeing.

At last, the rehearsal ends, and Dream is leaving the room so quickly it's difficult to remember what the stage looked like with him standing in the middle of it. For a moment, he looks like an apparition vanishing through the doors, a flare against a camera lens as the blond of his hair reflects the light. Then he's gone, as though he was never there in the first place.

George takes a little longer, because the thought of running into him is enough to stick him to his seat. When he leaves, he sees the sun drooping towards the horizon like a heavy bead of honey, golden and reluctant to depart from the glass of the sky. So it goes slowly, resisting the kiss of the horizon. Even as he watches, it begins to set faster and faster, until George isn't sure whether he's imagining its movement or not, and he thinks this is a little like falling in love against his will—slowly at first as he resists, then quicker and quicker and quicker until he annihilates himself at sunset.

When his eyes begin to sting, he remembers the violin case in his hand. Perhaps it's his imagination running circles around itself, but he thinks it feels heavier than before, burning a hole through his palm. He wonders if it's screaming to be returned to its owner. He wonders if that's why his heart aches, too.

His feet carry him the rest of the way. George doesn't really process the fact he's going to *see* Dream until he's standing outside the door to the green room, one fist raised to the wood. Then it hits him all at once, stomach sinking lower and lower until he swears he is nothing more than atoms and the space in between.

Nothing more than atoms.

He knocks, because there is blood in his veins, and a heart in his chest, and he is made of atoms, nothing more.

As he hears the *come in* from the other side of the door, George exhales, relieved that the Philharmonic moved out of the Carnegie in the sixties. He's not sure he could step over the threshold like this, with his hands shaking and Dream's name printed at the top of the concert programme. There's his own, too. A little further down, a little smaller. Separated by violinists better than him, worse than Dream. But it's bad enough to see their names so close together, residing on the same page as though everything is just the same as it was when Dream performed at the front of the Juilliard orchestra years and years ago.

The door clicks behind him, softly alerting Dream of his presence. It's difficult to see anything in the room, because the lights are turned as low as the dimmers will allow, and only the last few drops of sunlight creep in from outside. But he picks out Dream's jacket deposited on one of the chairs, and a neat pile of clothes on the table next to it. Folded, exactly the way George does it.

He swallows. Casts his gaze further, so he may stop thinking about their clothes in the machine together, the subtle ways Dream said *I love you I love you I love you* instead of professing it from every stage he performed upon.

As George draws in air, it congeals at the back of his throat. And the muscle contracts around it, lips fluttering open in an attempt to make his lungs work as they're predispositioned to. But it's difficult, because Dream is sitting in the window, with one leg up on the sill, chin resting on the bend of his knee.

Their eyes meet in the glass. Rather than turning to face George, eye to eye, green to decay, Dream continues to fix his gaze upon some point on the horizon, clouded as it is by the light pollution spilling from the skyline.

Even though the sun is reduced to little more than the end of a matchstick where it seeps into the ground, George can see the clouds swarming overhead, underbellies painted orange. In the places they break, the sky appears colder than ever. From where he stands, George can't see the people hurrying around on the street, but he's certain they pull their clothes tighter to their bodies, rush across the roads with taxis narrowly missing their feet, blow into their hands whenever they have to wait a while. It'll snow soon, he thinks. There's a strange tension in the air which only occurs before vast change, like waking up and seeing the world covered in white.

Or running into the green room.

Speaking of Dream, there is a black shirt stretching over his shoulders, unbuttoned at the top so George can see the knife-shape of his sternum in the glass, pointing down towards his stomach. The material shines slightly where the light gathers at the folds. His pants are black, and his shoes, and his nails, and the zeros of his irises—so much black it becomes troublesome to pick his reflection out in the window, since the silhouettes of the buildings around them tend to bleed into his form. A freckle sits in the centre of his nape.

George has pressed his lips to it a thousand times. It seems wrong to remain standing here when it's just visible above the fold of Dream's shirt, daring him to come closer, come closer, kiss as though they're lovers. Kiss Dream in exactly the same way he kisses George, diamond shaped.

When George draws his free hand into a fist, his signet ring reflects the last swallow of sunset. He clears his throat, uncomfortable.

"I have your violin," he says, and the words feel too big in his mouth. For all his years learning to keep his voice as measured as the ticking of a metronome, George can never quite prepare himself for the way Dream disarms him.

“Put it down,” Dream says, one hand running along his jaw now. “Just there. Thank you.”

The case meets the floor too quickly. It resonates despite the low ceiling, but George doesn’t apologise as he draws back upright, or startle like a rabbit caught in two headlights. Perhaps he would, once. But now he stands in front of Dream with his pulse blinding in his ears, and Dream continues to look at the city with his lips pressed into a line, and George is much too acquainted with grasping at things he doesn’t deserve because the apple never falls far from the tree.

Far enough to end up with bruised flesh, all the same.

“Aren’t you even going to look at me?”

Dream’s eyes meet his own in the glass. Like this, he can’t tell that the colour looks wrong to him, because every hue is leached from this image of Dream. Instead, his cheeks are composed of high-rise grey, his pupils the same black as the sky. He says, “do you want me to?” and his words are coloured impossibly darker.

“You think I’m afraid of you?”

“You’re not afraid of me. But you would flinch when I touched you, and you would turn away from me in bed, and you would lock the door when you were playing violin. So I think there was some part of you that was very, very dissatisfied with me.”

“Was?”

Dream laughs now. His back presses to the glass, although his eyes remain shut as though he’s preparing himself to look over the edge of the cliff at the rocks lining the bottom. “Was, because you cut me out, didn’t you? Like when you try, and try, and try to play something right, but you just can’t straighten it out, and you take the manuscript in your hands and screw it up as tight as you can—” Dream’s hand presses flat over his heart, before drawing into a fist so hard it shakes—“and throw it right out.” His palm falls to rest on his thigh, open.

“I don’t—”

“But I know you do. I know, because I heard you scream, sometimes, like the music was hurting you. And then you would throw it out, because that’s easier than accepting not everything has to align with your fucking idea of perfection to *be perfect*.”

Dream’s eyes open.

George stares right into them, jaw clenched.

“I hope you sleep easier,” Dream murmurs, a grim smile visible on his face for a moment before his head drops down.

He thinks of cathedral ceilings, of the sound water makes when pushed through the heart of a city, of fingers carved out to fit a fingerboard tripping over piano keys, of Dream tight around him, and blue glass rippling across his face, and wine staining their kisses. And of waking afterwards, soaked in agitation, chest crushed under the weight of something lost.

So he shakes his head. “You’re wrong.”

“I’m wrong?”

“Yeah.” His tongue darts out to wet his lips, and it stings against the split in the middle. “I was

scared of you, because I didn't recognise you anymore.”

“People are supposed to grow, aren't they?”

Dream shifts to his feet, and there's no time for George to step away before he's coming closer, closer, shoulders squared as though facing a blizzard. But he thinks flinching would prove Dream's point. So he stands so still he could well be constructed of marble as Dream leans forward, head narrowly missing his hip as he bends down to wrap his fingers around the handle of the violin case.

Then he straightens up, and he's withdrawing. The violin case goes on the windowsill where his limbs rested a minute prior, oblong and dark in the dimness of the room. George knows Dream stopped shutting himself in the dark before his performances years ago, but as his nostrils flare and the smell of cigarette smoke singes the delicate lining of his nose, he supposes it would be naive to assume things remain static for all of time.

He supposes he should know that better than anyone.

The humming silence is broken as Dream begins to laugh to himself, hands laid flat on the lid of the case, fingers evenly spaced with the stickers peeking between the gaps.

“I think you forgot I know you better than anyone in the whole world,” he says, before George can ask. “Even now, I know your hands are clasped, like this—” Dream lifts his arms, wraps his fingers around each other behind his back, palms pressed together. And as he does it, George realises it's a mirror of his position, gripping so tightly his nails threaten to slice through his skin.

His hands come apart instantly.

Dream's hands drop to his sides a heartbeat later, although they don't appear awkward suspended in midair. “So I think I know what you want,” he says.

“Which is what?”

Instead of answering right away, Dream is approaching him once again, but there's no violin case resting by his feet to excuse it this time. And as he comes closer, George realises there's a strange electricity radiating from each sharp angle of him, and darkness clings to the jut of his collarbones instead of soft lamplight. Where his eyes once appeared the same green as the winter melting from the trees, now it appears as something closer to Scheele's, pools of arsenic reflecting his own back at him.

And when he speaks, his voice is poisonous just the same.

“Get on your knees.”

They almost comply without his agency, legs trembling for a moment. “What?” he breathes, gasping as two fingers knock his chin upwards. And there are two eyes glaring right at him, two eyes he knows better than his own iced over with a spite he never thought he'd see again.

“This is what you want, isn't it?” Dream guides him onto the floor, although his hands shift to grasp at his jaw, holding it in place as George's knees press against the boards. “To kneel for me.”

George waits.

“To kneel for your virtuoso,” Dream finishes after a moment. And the weight of it sinks straight into his chest, squeezing at his insides as his cock presses against the stiff material of his pants.

He stares up, kneeling at Dream's feet. As though he's begging for repentance, as though he's a fucking *sinner*. He stares up at Dream, and the last decade slips between his fingers. Where it goes, he's not sure. But the tips of ears burn red, and his lips press themselves together, and his palms fit between his thighs, and heat pools in the bottom of his stomach because this is what he's been craving for *months*.

"I'm waiting for an answer," Dream says, and his eyes are more familiar than breathing. At the same time, they're like nothing George has ever seen before.

"You're right this time."

"I know. I know you by now, no matter how much you wish I didn't." Now Dream settles his hand against the side of George's face, and his thumb traces the curve of his cheekbone as though he doesn't know it all by heart. "And this?"

He pretends to turn it over for a moment, just to watch the way Dream's agitation builds. "For old times' sake."

Dream's palm leaves a red impact mark across George's cheek when he slaps him. He knows, because he'd look at himself in the mirror afterwards all those years ago, fingertips pressing to his jaw as if to prolong the feeling of Dream's skin colliding with his own. So he knows how it looks now, with heat spreading over one side of his face, entirely different to the warmth that accompanies Dream's lips kissing him in the middle of the evening, Dream's hands sliding up the sides of his neck to pull him closer, closer. His head jerks aside, and it's different.

The air on his tongue turns metallic.

"This is what you wanted, isn't it?" Dream's voice comes from above him. And he's regrown his pointed teeth, the ones with which he'd spit venom at George as he knelt on practice room floors with stars collecting in the corners of his eyes. His voice sheds the softness George is accustomed to. In its place, there are scales gleaming along each sharpened edge.

"Yes," he breathes, heart beating faster and faster as the weight of Dream's voice constricts around him.

Dream's thumb is hot against his pulse point, pressing down until the ceiling looks to be adorned with stars. "This is what you wanted?" A pause, before Dream's palm strikes the side of his face once again.

"Yes."

"Then you'd better make the most of it. I don't usually fuck people before performances, you know." There's a shifting of fabric as Dream frees his cock, red as the side of George's face. "But I guess if I'm smoking again, this isn't much different, is it?"

"Sin is sin," George agrees, leaning forward to press his lips against the tip. He widens his eyes when he does it, allowing the starlight to glide through the window and reflect in his irises. He knows Dream likes it when he looks a little more ethereal than usual. When the heavens become trapped in his eyes.

He knows it rings true, because Dream is cursing under his breath, reaching downwards to push his fingers into his hair and pull hard. "You destroyed me from the inside. Like a toxin. So yeah, I would say sin is fucking sin. It's all the same, really."

George doesn't want to think about what that means.

He fixes it in the only way he knows, and parts his lips, takes Dream on his tongue with his eyes flitting shut. His tongue traces the vein on the underside of it, blindly following the memory of how Dream feels, inside and out. The sound of his low groans becomes background noise, unimportant to the raging tide battering against the interior of George's skull. Dream is heavy in his mouth, hitting the back of his throat. George's joints seize. He continues to gaze up at Dream every now and again, and hollow his cheeks, and lift one hand to his thigh to pull him closer, and hum as though there's absolutely nothing wrong even though he feels as though the building is shaking, falling apart.

There's no piano to crawl beneath this time. There is only Dream—Dream hot on his tongue, Dream warm beneath his hands, Dream pulling his hair so hard his scalp stings, Dream shallowly thrusting further into his mouth as though he wants to take George's voice all to himself, force him to communicate through a broken *cazenda* played on a perfect violin.

When words run out, there is always music. But George is as much of a soloist as he is a poet, so he may as well be mute.

Dream's hands tug at his hair again, and there are stars swimming across his vision in drunken galaxies. The taste of *precum* gathers on his tongue, overwhelming. The side of his cheek burns. And with all of *Dream* adding up like that, violent, bitter, bloody, George's veins start to course, faster, faster, faster. Until there is not marble obstructing his wrists, but clarity, and pain.

"Up," Dream says simply once he's withdrawn from George's mouth.

He swallows a whine from the loss, and stands upright. His legs tremble, weakened by kneeling at Dream's feet for him to push and pull and tug and maim however he pleases. George accepts it all. He's missed the feeling of being painted in red by his artist.

"Why'd you stop?" he whispers, even as Dream presses their foreheads together. If he were to lean forward a little, surely their lips would connect, surely he could taste Dream's tongue on his own, wrap his arms around his neck and play at being lovers for a while longer.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you? In some twisted way, I really think you are."

He presses his lips together. Then he nods, once.

Because George's addiction to Dream grew from hatred, and the sting of his hand to his cheek feels like dipping his tongue into a drug after too many years without it.

And, well. Perhaps burnt children really do love the fire.

"Yes," he says, when Dream doesn't speak, nervous he'll demand George leave if he doesn't plead earnestly enough. "Reminds me of how it was in the beginning. When it was just sex."

Dream's face flickers for a moment.

Then he's setting his lips into a grim line, and pulling George towards the other window with an iron grip around his wrist, and he's pushing him to sit on the sill, and his back collides with the glass as Dream towers over him. "We have enough time," he says in a hurry. He pushes his fingers into George's mouth, presses down on his tongue for a moment. Then he pulls back, running a harsh thumb over the split marring his bottom lip. "Do you want me to fuck you?"

"Yes," he sighs.

Sighs, because the way Dream angles his head to suck purple up his neck is something akin to

coming home, stepping over the threshold with the rain plastering his hair to his head. As Dream makes a mess of his clavicles, George thinks of kicking puddle water at one another, of running between the buildings instead of calling a driver, of pushing past each other on the stairs, of abandoning their clothes in the doorway and having Dream take him on the couch with water still sticking to their skin.

With the rasp of teeth to his collarbone comes realisation.

“Wait,” he says, one hand darting out to Dream’s shoulder. He withdraws it soon enough, as though the contact scalded him.

Dream waits, one eyebrow raised.

“Have—have you been with anyone else?”

Dream laughs at that, shakes his head once. “No. Did you really think I’d go back to fucking every half pretty violinist I met? After you?”

Despite himself, George’s breath catches in his throat. *Pretty, pretty, pretty.*

“I wasn’t sure,” he admits, thinking of disembodied voices through the phone and Dream’s uncanny magnetism.

“Then you don’t know me as well as I thought you did.”

George leans forward in nothing short of relief, lips seeking another set to move against. He leans forward, and Dream leans away, shaking his head. His arms pin George to the window. His eyes slip downwards, catching on the sight of George’s arousal pressing against his thigh.

“Don’t,” he says simply. It’s difficult for George to tell whether he sounds enraged or distraught. “We didn’t kiss back then, not in a way that mattered. We shouldn’t kiss now.”

“Who says it matters?” Skin against skin, that’s all it is. And with Dream’s hands sliding up beneath his shirt to pinch harshly at his nipples, to leave red crescents over the layer of flesh covering his hips, George wonders if it would really be so different from sex, to join their mouths and breathe the same air.

Dream’s eyes flash dark. Then he guides George to face the window instead, holds him to it with one hand knotted in his hair. He leans forward, so close the press of his exhale falls across George’s neck. And he says, “I do.”

I do, I do, I do.

But there is no chapel here, no stars painted across the ceiling. There is Dream sucking red across his neck, so high the collar of his shirt can’t hope to cover it. There is glass pressing to his cheek, fogging when he breathes. There is all of New York laid out before him as though he owns it, but George doesn’t feel as powerful as he should because Dream’s hands are pushing his waistband down, and his fingers are lightly glancing across his hole, and there’s a high whine building at the back of his throat because he’s going to be taken apart as the sky clouds over and the temperature drops.

And he’s letting it happen, because the apple never falls far from the tree.

George tries to imagine it’s just the same as the first time, with draughts spilling through the gaps in the sealant and Dream’s fingers pushing past his rim as though to break him into a thousand

pieces. And with the rasp of teeth against his skin, perhaps it should be simple. With Dream's eyes blazing, it should be natural to fall back into their old way of hedonism, and sin, and exchanges of teeth and tongue and skin to communicate their hatred when even music fails them.

But Dream knows him much better now.

He writhes when he brushes over his prostate, fingers flexing around nothing as Dream holds him to the glass with his other hand splayed over his nape. Even the way the pads reach forward to press where his pulse beats is too much, too familiar. George can tell where each of his calluses are, because he's spent so long turning his hands over by candlelight.

Dream could take his life in this moment, George realises. And even then, even with his blood dripping into his cuticles, perhaps that wouldn't feel unfamiliar, either.

So as Dream begins to fuck him, George begins to cry.

It's not inevitable—Dream and George aren't fated to hold one another in their arms, as Dream was fated to cradle the violin. He chooses to cry because it's better than screaming, and it's better than turning right around and taking Dream's face between his palms to bring their lips back together. He cries, because his tears sting as they trace over the red of his cheeks.

Dream pauses, settled deep inside of him. "You're crying," he says, in that evening tone of voice. The same he would use to say, *it's late, I love you, goodnight*.

He hurriedly brushes a hand over his face. "I'm fine. Keep going."

He prays Dream won't ask any more questions, will grip his hips harder and fuck into him with no regard for how it makes his skull knock against the glass. He prays for his eyes to roll up in his head, clothes stained when he spills all over himself. He prays Dream will go back to pretending it's their first time once again, will say he loves to *hate* instead of saying he loves *George*.

When he speaks, the tone of his voice might as well be a confession all by itself.

"Are you sure?" Soft, murmured against the delicate skin of his neck.

"I said I'm fine," he hisses. He pushes his hips backwards in one swift movement, takes Dream all the way in so he feels brimming once again. "Keep going."

Dream's fingers squeeze at him tighter. "You just don't care, do you?" He thrusts, and hits George's prostate first try. Of course he does. However much George would like to pretend they're strangers, nothing shy of a rock to the head will stop Dream from knowing him inside and out.

Even then, he suspects Dream's body would still know him just as before, even after his mind forgets.

"No," he lies, a force of habit. Weakness is bad, admitting defeat is bad, crying is bad, acting on emotion is fucking bad. And he's done all of those things since he met Dream, so he might as well seize some of his agency back.

Dream's palm meets the unblemished skin at the top of his thigh. George sucks in a breath, torn between the heat rushing to the impact and the cool glass resting against his cheek.

"What was that for?" he asks, before Dream thrusts forward, brushing over the spot that makes his fingers curl around nothing and his lips fall open.

“You lied.”

“You think?”

George watches as the streetlights blur out of focus, as the windows swim around like fireflies, as Dream’s hips meet his ass, over and over and over. He whines, and Dream’s fingers are in his mouth again, pressing down against his tongue with little resistance. And it all tastes like salt—the aftertaste clinging to his tongue, Dream’s skin meeting his own, the taste of his tears as they track over his cheeks, stick his eyelashes together, turn his scleras red as if he’s got soap in his eyes. He wonders if it makes this sacramental.

To his surprise, Dream’s voice comes out waterlogged when he speaks. “You lied, you lied, you lied,” he repeats, so quietly George is convinced it’s only for his own benefit. “You’re crying, George. I know why. I know.”

In a moment of rage, George’s fist collides with the glass, so hard he worries for a moment if it’ll swell too much to hold his bow correctly. “Stop pretending you know me,” he says. His words spill out in a grey haze across the window pane, before vanishing again. As though the glass refuses to keep them there, as though it knows they’re untrue. His chest heaves, his vision fills with lamplight shining from unfamiliar windows, the first hailstones begin to fall from the sky, slowly at once, then faster and faster, until they drum against where George’s face rests. “You know exactly what I showed you, what I told you, nothing else.”

He takes a deep breath, lightning sparking across his mind whenever Dream pushes against his insides just right. “Stop pretending you know me, because nobody does. I wouldn’t have had to leave if you did.”

Because Dream only saw the parts George wanted him to—the structure of his face, the way he can cry so pretty it appears his eyes are diamond-encrusted, the poise of his back, his shoulders, his chin. Never the way he’d sit in the shower with his legs up to his chest and his eyes red, chest heaving in and out, in and out, never the way he’d despise sleeping in their bed because it was usually half empty, never the way he’d bite his lip when Dream fucked him on the piano and wish it was viscous enough for him to feel it on Monday morning.

Dream fucks him harder after that.

He doesn’t reply, doesn’t spit venom in his ear any longer. George supposes this is the point words run out. And he thinks there are more ways to speak once words dry up, because the way Dream pushes him up against the glass, runs his hands over his stomach, his chest, bites at his neck, curses under his breath screams everything left unsaid.

George finishes first, since one of Dream’s hands has moved forwards to tug at his cock, palms rough with calluses. He continues to thrust in exactly the right place, and so George’s eyes are falling shut before long, mouth opening as he breathes faster, faster. His release ruins his shirt, and it’s sheer luck he had the foresight to leave changing for afterwards. A moan tears free of his tongue. The glass fogs once more.

And as usual, Dream doesn’t stop.

He doesn’t stop, even as George writhes with the force of it, eyes guided skywards as his body tremors.

The stars fill his vision as Dream spills inside of him, but they must be imagined, because pollution covers half of the sky, and sleet the rest. They must be painted there, allusive enough that their true

nature can never be captured with paint, or words, or music. They must be a rendition of it, nothing more.

Dream pulls out, leaving his release leaking onto his thighs, branding George as *his his his*. Even though they're not together, it feels right. It feels as though they need each other to survive, just as they once did. It feels as though their love is still in the inferno stage, the all-consuming, maddening, insanity causing stage. Before they allowed it to burn out.

Gently, so gently George isn't sure if he's imagining it or not, Dream's lips press to the rise at the top of his spine. And he realises Dream isn't gritting his teeth anymore, isn't dancing in the flames, isn't wishing for George to fall to his knees before every concert in his future. Rather, he seems resigned to saying goodbye.

With shaking fingers, he pulls his pants back up, pushes his fingers through his hair as his chest rattles. Then he allows himself to fall to the sill, ignoring the ache which accompanies the act of sitting. He watches, as Dream tucks himself back into his clothes, adjusts the chain around his neck, flexes his fingers as though ensuring they still work.

George waits for the universe to contract.

He wishes that when it starts all over again, the stars will be kinder to him.

As Dream is walking towards the door, he stops all of a sudden. He turns around. His eyes slice the darkness into halves, cutting across the room and into George's own. Poison, decay. They're two sides of the same twisted coin when they're like this, when they smell and taste of each other and they are not violinists, but people.

Wretched, wretched people.

"I know you," is what he says, trembling. "I know you're doing everything you can to pretend I don't, I know you're fucking terrified for someone to pay that much attention to you, for fear I'll see the places you're breaking apart at the seams. But I *do*. And I let it happen anyway, and now you've broken me, too." He laughs to himself, red eyes and bitten lips. "The worst part is I would have you back, if I could. But you're blaming it on me when I didn't do anything, because it's your fault."

Dream pauses for a second, waits for the words to land.

"It's your fault."

"Dream—" George calls, one hand stretching in front of him.

But it's said to an empty room, because the door slams behind his silhouette.

George finds himself staring into the plughole. It stares back, like an iris. He brings handfuls of water to his face, presses his fingertips into the corners of his eyes to scour the feeling of emptiness taking root in his core.

Of course, it doesn't go anywhere.

He rests both hands on the sink and stares at himself in the mirror, eyeing the amethyst climbing up the side of his neck with disdain. Then he frets with his collar for a while, buttoning it high enough that most of the bites are obscured. Awfully unprofessional, he thinks. Especially since he's vying to sit in the middle of the stage, become concertmaster so he can write home without feeling like a failure. With the imprints of Dream's teeth stamped all over his skin, he can't help but dread showing his face again, sitting in his chair and pretending it doesn't make him ache.

Even so, a small part of him delights in having something to hide.

Only one peeks above the material, dark and vicious and fucking bloodthirsty. He presses his thumb into it, winces at the sting.

Then he presses again, harder.

George leaves the bathroom with his features schooled to nonchalance and his clothes falling in perfect lines over his frame, not one hair out of place to denote what he's done since the rehearsal ended. Save for his neck, of course. But they'd have to stare at him to notice, look at his every facet to tell the difference, and with Dream so radiant at the front of the stage, he doesn't think they will. He doesn't think anyone's gaze will stick to him for longer than a second.

So with a tendency to melt into the shadows cast by those made of light, George makes his way back to the orchestra.

As expected, nobody he sees pays him much attention. There's a strange energy in the air, the sort that accumulates without fail before every performance like this, with a soloist so enchanting every seat in the auditorium goes to someone or another. He thinks about why people are drawn to soloists, again and again. And he supposes they're excited because Dream makes them feel *it* again as if for the first time, the joy which accompanies *understanding* for the very first time, running all the way through a piece and watching the notes twist themselves into something more than dots on a page.

It's been so long since he felt like that. Despite everything, George feels himself anticipate it right alongside them, electricity sparking beneath his skin. The minutes tick by, slow at first, then so fast the performance seems to arrive all at once. Time stands still for no one.

He doesn't see Dream until they're backstage, waiting for the doors to open.

It's difficult to pick out the faces of everyone around him in the dimness, difficult to tell their foreheads apart from their cheeks. But he knows exactly where Dream stands, because the darkness seems to cluster towards him. Where a slat of light peeks through the stage doors, and another creeps forward from the corridor, Dream's face is brought to life in gentle gold, offset by pitch black. He stands there, violin relaxed under his arm. He stands there, as though he's not about to perform the Tchaikovsky concerto, of all things.

George feels certain parts of himself stiffening at the sight of it, exhilarated by Dream's stance. It reminds him of standing backstage at the Carnegie, Dream whispering into his hair that it'd be okay, so long as he didn't fall behind. But it also reminds him of watching Dream fall to pieces under the pressure, a cigarette stuck between his lips and rainwater dripping from the ends of his hair. As he looks at Dream again, he can see the way his fingers knot themselves in the material of his pants, curling and uncurling, over and over and over. And George realises he's just the same, even after being dragged around the world a thousand times.

Just before he steps onto the stage, he surges forward, professionalism be damned.

His lips graze Dream's cheekbone, teeth meeting the skin for a second in a kiss dressed with barbs.

"Don't worry," he whispers, so quietly none of the other violinists can hear it. A part of him wants this to be for them, even as Dream prepares to walk on stage and present the music for the entire world to adore. Then he swallows, because the ghost of another sentence bubbles against the back of his throat, dishonest.

He draws away. Where the split of his lip pressed, a spot of blood stains the skin.

George doesn't reach to remove it.

Rather, he leaves the confines of the darkness backstage, light falling across his cheeks as he smiles at a sea of faces he can't pick apart from one another, even with contacts settled over his irises. The deadweight of his heart begins to beat, sluggishly at first, before picking up speed like a songbird brought back to life. He sits in his seat at the edge of the stage, and wishes he was closer to the centre.

He knows when Dream walks onto the stage, because the audience seem to sit up straighter, eyes fixated upon him. As they applaud, George wishes to scream, to climb to his feet and grab him by the hand, so tight his fingers shake. He isn't sure why his heart calls for Dream so abrasively. He was the one to ruin it in the first place, to demand Dream leave the apartment they picked out together, to push him away and away every time he tried to come closer. All Dream wanted to do was know him, and George was so terrified of the prospect of it that he chose to destroy instead.

When Dream begins to play, George's worst fear is brought to life.

He made a mistake.

Dream does not perform like he was spilling inside of George an hour ago, grasping his hips with his nails digging into the flesh. He does not perform like he's angry, like he wishes to make the audience murmur amongst themselves afterwards and gaze up at the stage with confusion marring their faces. He performs like a man driven half-mad, so lost in the notes it's unclear where he ends and the music begins. And it's beautiful.

It's so, so beautiful.

Within the beauty, George notices something ominous, something creeping into his bloodstream like arsenic. It's a warmth. A warmth which has always been there, really. A warmth he mistook for Dream forgetting about him, using the world as his muse instead of George, who is cold, and perfect, and made of marble.

But as Dream plays, the corners of his lips tilt up, and he realises the gravity of his mistake.

Because Dream melts the frost in his veins, wraps his fingers around his heart and makes it beat. Dream kisses every inch of him under candlelight, and stares, entranced, as George laughs at him. And he supposes Dream was thinking of him all along, really. Dream was showing him what he saw, and George took it between his hands, and broke, and broke, and broke. Exactly the same as he always wanted Dream to do to him. It must've been so irrevocably painful, to be misunderstood like that.

With the memory of Dream thrusting against the back of his throat, tears brimming in his eyes, George understands why Dream was so averse to hurting him again.

Rather than running from the stage to hide somewhere dark, George listens to the second movement begin, then the third. It only grows worse. Dream is possessed, and his fingers are his instrument, and George imagines the violin trembles with the weight of the emotion he's piling onto it. He wonders if the strings will break. If the bow will snap, if the bridge will come loose.

Perhaps the universe is trying to tell him something, because none of those things happen. George doesn't believe in fate, or divinity, or heaven, or hell, but as Dream's soul cries out, he thinks he might believe in a fickle little thing called love. Fickle, since it is mutable at heart, prone to disguising itself as many other things. Like music, like hatred. But he's had years of *being loved*, and so George would like to think he at last recognises it as it is spelled out so plainly for him now.

Love is mutable, and complex, and it isn't always right.

When the concerto draws to a close, there is an ache in a chest, placed there by a sense of desperation so strong it turns his insides limp.

Dream catches his eye as he's walking off. George expects him to glare, or perhaps to have a sheen over his eyes. But he doesn't. He walks with his back straight, and just as he's passing where George stands, he looks right at him with a dip of his chin. With that acknowledgement, the desperation grows stronger, until George wonders if his heart is about to stop altogether. Because above all else, he prays Dream will do the wrong thing one last time.

And allow George back into his arms.

Once they have left the stage, George's surroundings blur once more. Corridors flashing around him, the distant sound of a poorly played piano resonating from somewhere in his memory.

He finds himself pacing down the street, counting down the seconds in his head until it's too late, the trigger's pulled, his insides are left soaking into the snow.

The snow.

George is walking, and his violin is securely on his back since he'd be too anxious about leaving it unattended, and his feet slip every now and again on the pavement because there's snow falling from the sky. It comes slowly at first, then...George thinks the way the snow falls is much like the passing of time, the dipping of the sun towards the horizon. So there are flakes caught in his eyelashes, in the ends of his hair. He draws his coat tighter around him, until it feels like a brace. He walks faster, because the seconds are passing, slowly at first, then,

He enters the place he's looking for, and the bell over the door announces his arrival. It's one of those big old fashioned things, slightly bronzed and weathered from being rung so many times every day. Then again, he supposes it might well be like that on purpose. People these days have penchants for making things look older than they are, as though perfection is too jarring to look in the eye.

George shudders. He tells himself it's from the cold.

In less than five minutes, he's wrapping his coat tighter around himself, preparing for December to hit him square in the face. The floorboards creak under his weight as he makes his way out, and

the odd smell of snapped flower stems invades his senses.

The door swings shut behind him, the bell ringing out into the street for one moment, only to be lost to the sound of traffic slicing through the snow in the next.

And in George's hands, a cluster of white lilies blooms.

"I was wrong," he says, standing in the doorway with the snow stuck in his hair melting onto his scalp.

The flowers in his arms tremble as he thrusts them forwards, head dipping down to beg for repentance. *I was wrong*, he says, and the words sting him on the way out, as though they are dressed in thorns.

I was wrong, I made a mistake.

This time, Dream turns to face him straight away. This time, the lights are brighter, and his features do not seem so angular. This time, there is the ghost of a smile settled over his lips when he takes the lilies, as though recalling the memories from when they were happy no longer pains him.

George only hopes it's not because he's made peace with the fact he'll never have him back.

"Say something," he begs, praying Dream is smiling because there is light at the end of the tunnel. It's odd to be on this side of things. After the Sibelius concert, Dream was the one to find him backstage, to take his face between his hands after he confessed to being unable to rid his presence from his mind, kiss him properly for the first time. So he stands here, watching Dream take the petals between two fingers, and it's odd.

Dream looks up. There is blood on his cheek. "Ask me what I was thinking about," he says.

George inhales so quickly it stings.

"What were you thinking about?"

He smiles, more to himself than George. He brings the flowers closer to his chest, and reaches up to crush the anthers between his fingers. Then his gaze flicks forward. "I think you already know."

"Yeah. I think so."

"And that makes you think you were wrong?"

George inhales, long and steady. "I think I got a lot of things about love wrong."

"Like what?"

He drags a hand through his hair, so hopelessly nervous under the weight of Dream's stare. If he were to open his mouth, George swears he would see Dream branded across his tongue, his teeth, his throat, so perhaps that's why his words are so naked for once. So honest, so unapologetic. "I

thought love was obsession. I thought obsession grew from hatred. Back then, I could hardly think of anything else, and I thought that meant it was right.”

“And?”

"And, and-" George's lip trembles, a leviathan pressure building in his chest as he realises the gravity of the love he holds in his bird-bone ribcage. "It doesn't matter that you changed, that you matured. Because I still love you anyway. Isn't that obsession all the same?"

"Not all obsession has to be hatred," Dream says, and George knows he's right.

Obsession can be gentle hands committing every flaw to memory instead of blood rising to the surface, red obscuring the vision so it may appear more romantic. Obsession is Dream kissing every knoll of his spine, plane tickets exchanged so they may spend more time together, unfamiliar repertoire flowing beneath their fingers since the act of playing in unison is more enjoyable than fighting for something perfect. Renting an apartment on the first floor, playlists he can mumble all the words to, violins left as parting gifts, lilies laid on cases.

All this time, George thought obsession came with splintering bones and snapped strings, snakes curling around necks and nooses ensnaring them because they'd burn themselves alive eventually.

But he was wrong, and the admission itself tastes like progress.

“I feel like...” he trails off, unsure how to ask.

“Like this conversation is a little too big for this room?”

George’s head snaps up, because Dream knows him even when words don’t. “Maybe. But I don’t want to ask you to come back home with me. I don’t know if you would want to see that apartment again.”

“That’s very honest of you.”

“I’m trying,” he says, pleading. He hopes it’ll make Dream see he’s ready to try again, that he won’t desert him in the snow this time. He hopes that despite everything, Dream can still trust him. “That’s what mistakes are for, isn’t it?”

“To get better afterwards?” Dream lets out a laugh. “Yeah, I would say so.”

The lilies end up on the table, and George is affronted by the smell of smoke and vetiver as Dream shrugs his jacket back over his shoulders, fitting his joints in all the places it’s almost worn through. Next comes his violin case, snug to his back. He lifts the other in his hand, and tucks the flowers under his arm last, as though he’s trying his utmost to keep them perfect and intact. “People don’t usually bring me flowers,” he says conversationally. Even so, George can’t help but feel like it’s leading into something, because Dream is more of a poet than he’ll ever be, and his words never quite mean nothing.

“When was the last time you got them?”

“The last time you came to a concert.” Dream stands still, allowing the weight of it to settle. George used to bring flowers to every recital he attended, pushing them into Dream’s hands, pressing his lips to Dream’s, holding him tight as he whispered about how wonderful it was into his mouth. Then he started worrying too much about his schedule, and the flowers stopped, too.

“I’ll bring more next time,” he says, hopeful. Perhaps it’s wrong to hope for something which hurt

Dream so terribly. Perhaps George doesn't care anymore.

After a moment, Dream's shoulders slump. He reaches for the lightswitch, and flicks it off, so they're plunged into darkness. Behind him, the city light continues to press against the window, so it haloes him in a golden glow as snow passes overhead. Maybe it'll be deeper now, maybe it'll have begun to stick to the pavements, the windowsills, the tops of cars. Maybe they'll be disorientated when they go outside, because the world will have changed all at once, and covered itself in white.

"My room is too high up," Dream says eventually. "So high up I look out of the window and I can't see anyone's faces anymore, as though they're all just put there by my imagination to make me feel less lonely. Makes me uneasy. I don't want to go back just yet."

"Didn't you ask if you could switch?"

"Yeah, but...it's Christmas. It's busy."

They look at each other for a moment, at an impasse. Then George takes the silence in his hands and breaks it, because he's so used to waiting for Dream so go first. "So what you're saying is..." he stops, then looks up at Dream to determine whether he's got it right. He finds only warmth in those eyes, even though they should be distrustful, so he says, "you want to come back to the apartment with me? Even though it's so awfully cold?" Not in the literal sense. They both know that.

"I'm saying I want to go back to the apartment with you."

George pulls his coat tighter around himself, pushes his face into its collar. He steps towards the door and holds it open with one hand, mindful of how full Dream's arms are. "Then we should get going," he says, following Dream out into the corridor. The door slams behind them, but it doesn't sound so awful now they're both on the same side of it. "Before the snow gets any worse."

"Would it be so bad, if it did?"

"No," he admits, cheeks coloured pink. "I'm just impatient to hold you."

He wishes he could take it back for a moment, fearful he's being too presumptuous.

Then Dream's arm is linking with his own, and George's hand is settling on his forearm out of habit, and he's staring up, eyes wide.

"I've been impatient to hold you for weeks," Dream says, tugging him along the corridor. "And a thousand instances before that—each time I went away."

"You say that like you always knew I'd come back."

Dream looks down at him, pausing for a moment while they wait for the elevator to reach them. "I did, idiot. There was no way you wouldn't."

"I thought you didn't believe in fate."

Lastly, Dream says, "I didn't need the stars to know that."

By the time they reach the apartment, the snow is melting through their clothes, and George's lips are more chapped than before. He flicks all the lights and winces, because everything is perfectly tidy, folded into squares or set exactly where it belongs. It never used to look like this. He wonders if Dream will still recognise it as home.

Then he sits himself in the same crumpled-cushion-seat as always, and George knows it'll be alright.

He sets two mugs on the coffee table a few minutes later, and they smell faintly of cinnamon, faintly of vanilla. Dream sips at his as his head tips back against the window, the snow falling behind him as though the world listens to his every command. George doesn't blame him. If he were a cloud, he'd cry when Dream left, too. And snow when he returns, desperate for a change to the grey monotony that composes the metropolis.

"I'm still wary," Dream admits when he catches George looking at him.

He supposes it's inevitable. These things don't fix themselves overnight, so even though Dream sits in the middle of his living room, he knows they can't fall back into a routine of normality. He knows Dream will leave in a while, when the snow eases off. And he'll go back to his hotel room on a floor too high off the ground, and perhaps they'll have made some progress, but perhaps they won't.

"I don't blame you," he says honestly. As much as he wants to plead for Dream to sit beside him and stay a while, he knows there are scars leftover. Scars which could be ripped open with the slightest movement, scars which beg to bleed out.

He looks up, and finds Dream staring at him from across the room. His mug comes to his lips, and when he sets it down, it resounds against the coffee table. There is no other sound to fill the room besides their breathing, besides the hum of the pipes, and George finds himself desperate to fill it with something.

"It's quiet," he says, rather than finding the words to explain to Dream how he's feeling right away. He thinks he needs more time before that, more time to compose himself just right, lay his insides out before him.

"Sometimes words won't come unless you force them."

"I suppose so."

They sit for a while longer, revelling in one another's presence. Then Dream gets to his feet, leaving the cup on the table, and George squeezes his eyes into half crescents, waiting for the sound of Dream shrugging his jacket back on to invade his ears. The sound of the door, more despicable than it was earlier.

Instead, the couch dips next to him.

He opens his eyes, and finds Dream sitting there, elbow propped up on the back and his knees pressing into the cushions, an exact mirror of the position he'd adopted when they drank wine here together. If he were to lean forward, George would be able to taste him. He prays it'll happen,

prays he'll taste the smoke on Dream's tongue, feel the remnants of the performance pulsing through his veins. He wants to relearn all of Dream, relearn what obsession feels like. Better this time, without imminent destruction at the end.

"What are you thinking, George?"

"I keep thinking about what you said."

"Which part?"

"*Not all hatred has to be obsession*," he repeats, inching his palm forward so it rests upon Dream's thigh. He waits for him to push it off, but he never does.

"Do you think I was right?"

George looks at the way they're leaning towards each other. He exhales, half expecting his breath to show up in front of his face like cigarette smoke. Dream is in the apartment despite everything, and he's certain pieces of his heart are still missing within his chest, but he's sitting here, and he's willing to listen to what George has to say. Obsession. He presses his thumb to the centre of George's lip, noticing where it's split in two. Obsession. He sits with his knees up on the couch, exactly the same as he did before he left, because he believes it's different this time.

Obsession.

"This is obsession?"

Dream is close now, sunspots dancing across George's vision each time the light reflects from his jewelry or his eyes. And his hands close around both of George's, holding them to his chest as though he's cupping his own heart. "Not exactly. I think it's more like being in love. That's much better than obsession, anyway."

"What's the difference?"

Some days, love eats George alive. Some days, love is a pyre, orange light blinding him and thick smoke filling his throat until he chokes.

Some days, love is a death sentence.

"If you're in love with someone, it doesn't matter if you're apart. You can do other things for fulfilment, because you know they'll be back eventually."

"But..." George trails off, a result of lonely showers and cordial small talk and rainy New York streets. Friends sacrificed for music, family cast to the sea. The sky as it glows red to pink to blue to black, the sound of his violin accompanying its metamorphosis until his eyes shut of their own accord. "I don't know what to do when you're not here. That's obsession, isn't it?"

"That's an obsession with your career, George." Dream seems a little exasperated as he says it, but not in a cruel way. It's in the way that suggests he's hopelessly endeared, in the way that says he'd follow George to the edges of the world if he asked. "And I'll help you this time. I—I can travel less, for a while. I'll help you, so long as you'll let me."

"That implies you're sticking around," George notes, splaying his hands flat against Dream's chest. "It sounds to me like you want to be around for a long, long time."

"I guess that was always the plan."

George doesn't have time to register what's happening before Dream's hands move to his jaw, holding either side of it with gentle fingers. He guides George's head up, but this time it's not to stare down at him in admonishment. This time, it's to pull him closer and kiss him as the snow drifts past the window, the signifier of changes. And they kiss, in an apartment devoid of christmas decorations, even though christmas stares at them from around the corner. They kiss, and Dream's lips are soft against him.

The softness of it doesn't send him to sleep.

Rather, a whine escapes him, torn free of his throat without his permission. He's embarrassed about it for a moment, but it doesn't matter. Dream pushes him to lie on the couch. Then he holds his wrists in his hands, and his weight settles on top of George, and their lips reattach, and he feels anchored to reality for the first time in a while. George is certain if he were to drift away now, there would be only a golden haze waiting for him in his head. Or perhaps he'd look at the memories of Paris and be happier about it, for he knows he can recreate them whenever he wants, in a better way than before, for he would not yearn for the impossible, but be content in what he has.

Dream pulls away, allowing the saliva stringing them together to remain for a moment. "Can I stay here?" he asks, before leaning forward to kiss him again, as if he can't keep himself away for much longer than a second.

"You want to stay here?"

"Well I can hardly go back to my hotel, can I? I'd never fall asleep in there."

Dream laughs when George swats at him, lips pulled down into a frown. He finds his lips preoccupied in the next moment, gasping as Dream licks into his mouth, heavy enough to send his thoughts draining from the bottom of his mind, light enough so that he's leaning in for more, more, more, like an addict.

"You know what kissing you is like?" Dream asks, the next time they break apart. George isn't sure how much deeper the snow would have become in the time since, because things like seconds and minutes become difficult to keep track of when the world is piecing itself back together.

"Something poetic, no doubt."

Dream supports his head with one elbow propped next to George's. "Actually, no," he says with a smile. "Maybe once I would've said kissing you feels like the fourth movement of a symphony, the crescendo as every single fucking person in the concert hall sits up in their seats, forgetting to breathe because the music is so climactic. But it's not."

"What's it like?"

"It feels like stepping over the threshold when I've been abroad for too long, hearing the piano through the walls. It feels like coming home."

George blinks, and when his eyes open again, he finds the light swimming around in his vision, fractured into a million stars, as though the ceiling is painted with them. A watery laugh resounds between them. "Then do it again. Do it a million times, if you must."

"Believe me," Dream says, leaning in so their faces touch and George's version of green floods across his vision in its entirety. Not poison, not snake scales, not jade. Just *Dream*. "I will."

George didn't expect to end up with Dream in his bed at the end of the night, bare skin pressed together as they clutch each other tight. Their clothes are in one heap on the floor, tomorrow's problem. They've abandoned the violins in the music room so George doesn't have to look at them as he lies in bed with the covers pulled up to his waist. Usually, he'd pull them further lest he wake up shivering, but today he has Dream to keep him warm. The room is the same as always, but there's something different about it tonight. Perhaps it's the snow. The light always looks brighter when it's snowing, as though the rain is exhilarated to be something different for a while.

"Isn't this strange?" he asks, words muffled against Dream's chest.

"Hmm?"

"We're not wearing anything, but we haven't done anything more than lie here."

Dream's lips meet the top of his head. "Did you forget what we did earlier?"

"That was earlier," he whispers. Then he leans up, up, up, until the tips of their noses brush against each other. He revels in the feeling of having another body next to him on the mattress, arms wrapped around him, lamplight falling across them to give Dream the illusion of being made of sunstone. "But it's different now. It's a lot, to lose the thing keeping you alive. Not in the literal sense of the word. It's even more to get it back when you never thought you would."

"I know." Dream kisses him gently. "I know. I thought the same thing."

"I'm sorry," he whispers. It might be his imagination, but he swears the snow mutes the word, paints the edges white so it may settle against the ground more softly. He isn't afraid of saying it anymore, because it won't split him in two to admit he can make mistakes, just the same as everyone else. He doesn't need to be hurt for that. He just needs someone to be there when he sets his violin down at the end of the day, arms open, eyes wide at the sight of him. Not because he is tragically beautiful, but because they are in love.

"Don't say sorry. Just don't do it again, alright?"

And because George is human, because he needs oxygen to breathe and blood to push around his body and Dream to return home every month, he nods, once. Nearly imperceptible in the darkness. Perhaps Dream doesn't see it, but he certainly feels the motion against his skin.

"I wouldn't dream of it."

For the first time, George falls into a state of reverie, and the sight of warm memory does not chill him to the core.

"You'll fall in if you keep that up."

“I’m not going to fall in,” George laughs, but he allows Dream’s hands to wrap around his waist and pull him away from the river regardless. He’s warm, even through his clothes. Before them, the river pulses, staring up at George as he leans further and further towards it.

“You say that—” Dream breaks off to press a kiss to the top of his head— “but if you *were* to fall in, just hypothetically speaking of course, you would be expecting me to save you.”

George hums under his breath. His head leans back against Dream, and his eyes slip shut so he can enjoy the summer falling in warm swathes across his face. With his vision blanked out, it’s overwhelming to distinguish the sound of the roads from the sound of the river cruise trundling by, the smell of running water to the smell of cigarette smoke. Then he says, “you would, though. Wouldn’t you?”

“...yes,” Dream admits.

“Exactly.”

After the sun has begun its descent in the sky, they find themselves sitting on the fire escape (they’re only there because George refused to climb onto the roof like Dream suggested), and a bottle of wine sits between them. But unlike the time they drank together and cried together and despaired together, Dream and George have matching smiles lifting the corners of their lips. Stained the same crimson, but happier, now. They rewrite that particular memory, with all of Paris passing mindlessly by beneath them. Unaware of the two people falling in love all over again.

George lifts the bottle to his lips, and the diamond hugging his ring finger glints in the light.

Then it’s gone, because Dream is slipping a warm hand into his, gripping tight and drawing their hands onto his lap. George lets him. He thinks he would let Dream drag him just about anywhere if he wanted, and there would be a lovesick grin to accompany them all the while.

(Save for the roof, of course.)

“Is it weird?”

“What?”

Dream reaches for the bottle now, and the streetlamp that’s just flickered to life next to them sends a beam of light through the glass. It passes through the bottle, and comes out green. George notes it as another thing to compare Dream’s eyes to, because he can’t really see green, and so its existence in his mind tends to revolve around Dream, Dream, *Dream*.

“Being in Paris,” Dream says, slowly. The alcohol weighs the words down, but it doesn’t irritate George. Rather, he finds himself desperate to take Dream’s face between his palms and kiss him senseless, as though the world is about to end and they need to make it count, one last time.

So he does.

When they break apart, he presses a kiss to the tip of Dream’s nose before saying, “no. I don’t think it’s weird. I think it’s nice.”

“I mean that most love stories that happen in Paris are supposed to be perfect, right? But we’re sitting here on the fire escape, like we just ran away from prom.”

George laughs, kisses him again. “That doesn’t make it less perfect.”

“You know what would make it *more* perfect?” Dream whispers conspiratorially.

And just to indulge him, George asks what.

“Climbing onto the roof.”

He laughs some more. Then he looks into Dream’s eyes and finds him dead serious, pupils unwavering where they meet his own. “What if I fall?” he asks, dragging a thumb over the centre of his lips. “What if I break my neck, and I can never play violin again—oh, god.”

“I’d still love you, concertmaster.”

Now George swats at his arm. “I told you to stop calling me that.”

“Sorry, concertmaster.”

“You’re horrid.”

Dream smiles, before stumbling to his feet, and George doesn’t know why he’s about to let him climb onto the roof because it’s surely not a good idea, and Dream is afraid of heights, and the street looks so awfully far away—

“Come with me,” Dream says, in the tone of voice he uses to say *goodnight, I love you*, and George knows he was a fool for believing he could deny him anything in the first place.

So they find their eyes growing heavy on the rooftop, an empty bottle of wine clutched in one of Dream’s hands, and George’s fingers in the other. They watch as the sun sets, slowly at first, then all at once, like a love blazing so ferociously it’s doomed to meet the horizon at some point, flicker out of existence, extinguish itself with its own vigour.

But even after the sun has set, they remain on the roof.

Why?

Because the moon is hanging in the middle of the sky like a mother of pearl, huge and round and enrapturing. Because even when it seems like the world will be plunged into darkness, there is love to be found within the night, waiting just over the horizon. Because even though the sun is nurturing, it shines so bright it becomes painful to look at after a while. The most beautiful part lies in the sunset. And the rising of the moon, wiser than its counterpart.

Dream and George look at the moon. Their grip on each other tightens. And silently, because they know each other so well the words aren’t needed, they agree that there is nothing to fear as their years turn and turn, so long as they accept the change.

Just as they accept the moon replacing the sun.

Chapter End Notes

YES i know i did another dumb twitter poll and a lot of people said 2 smut parts!! and then i realised i probably shouldnt do that because the point is they matured or whatevrrr and probably repeating jaw again wouldnt show that very clearly. but also because im still wondering whether i have time 2 write a lil christmas oneshot with

them. just being cute n shit. healing. christmas presents. dream finally gets a new jacket. tell me what u think. i can just disappear forever if not.

anyway thank u for reading!!!! this fic killed me a lot HOLY SHIT it was difficult to write but i think it turned out ok. idk. i genuinely never know these days.

the last scene is a reference to my gf's fic omg gay rights!!! u can read it [here](#) (please. it's so good) originally i wanted 2 make it more ambiguous as to whether it's another one of george's weird lucid dreams or an epilogue but i think we all fucking know. LMAO. happy for them!

anyway thank u again! love you all <3
- saint <3

End Notes

not this shit again

drop a kudos if u enjoyed! tell me what u think! threaten my bloodline!! idk if anyone is reading this but hopefully if u are u enjoyed it hehe thumbs up. i'll try and get the next part out asap!!

thank you mar, ant, lola, angel, bitter, kirk, liza etc etc sorry if i have berated u about this fic and didnt name u i berate a lot of people about it :')

[playlist](#) if u want 2 listen along with them

chat with me on [twitter](#)!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!